

Broken **Harnesses**

By

Harry F. Wilkins
&
Roxane L. Anderson

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Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Wilkins, Harry, 1928 –
Anderson, Roxane, 1960-

Broken Harnesses / Harry F. Wilkins and Roxane L. Anderson

Contact the authors at: www.brokenharnesses.com

Book design and layout by BK Publishing
www.bkpublishing.ca

This memoir has been modified, names and places have been
changed to protect the innocent.

ISBN: 978-0-9879465-6-0

Cover and interior photographs from the personal collections of
the authors

Interior photographs reprinted with permission from the Manitoba
Archives and Department of National Defense

Authors' photo and drawings by Rita Wilkins

Autograph book verses, quotations and proverbs, found in the
public domain

Excerpts of *Broken Harnesses* were previously published in
Canadian Stories magazine, titled "The Christmas Parcel," "Pride Has a
Cost" and "When Luck Runs Out" (Vol. 10 No. 58, '07, Vol. 12 No. 65
and No. 66, '09)

Acknowledgements

Thank you to our families for their encouragement and the Selkirk Library Writers for critiquing passages of *Broken Harnesses*. Special thanks to our wife and mother, Rita Wilkins for her ongoing encouragement and faith in this book.

Harry Frederick Wilkins
Roxane Anderson

In loving memory of Ellen Wilkins

“You asked me to write,
Now what shall it be.
Just two little words,
Remember me.”





Archives of Manitoba—Agriculture —Farms—c.1930. Hay stacks (29)

A silent wish for what might have been ...

Going Home

End of the journey
Long awaited return to a homestead
Where a threshing machine stands

Sheet metal reflects morning sun
The sentinel welcomes the visitor
Weathered hand returns salute

A silent wish for what might have been
Endless search and longing
Difficult choices made a lifetime ago

Old and worn
Machine rust stains and childhood scars
Washed away by seventy years of rains

He adjusts a fallen sleeve pipe
A final act of dignity from
One soldier to another

H.F.W. & R.A.

Prologue

The rows of plants with luscious leaves well-rooted in rich black earth, remind me of long lines of soldiers in parade dress, silent, at attention awaiting inspection. I am satisfied by the pile of wilted thistles and quack grass. My efforts finished before the grandchildren arrive. Tucking the hoe under the crook of my arm, I adjust my cap to keep the late afternoon sun out of my eyes and remove leather gloves from damp hands. Dirt has seeped inside the gloves accentuating the creases in my weathered palms. It is time for this old soldier to retire.

A light breeze stirs the corn stalks and they sway back and forth, blocking the sunlight, casting darkness between the rows. Mesmerized by the moving shadows, my thoughts drift back to another place and time. Seventy years and more have gone by and still the terror of childhood memories creep into my mind. I see an old farm house with a shanty roof that has since burnt down, the place where any hope of happiness was stripped from me.

Long hours of work keep the haunting memories distant and I plunge the hoe a final time into the earth and move on. This backyard garden is as close as an old soldier can get to his first love of farming. Leaving the vegetable patch, I feel the familiar ache in my arthritic hip, a reminder of childhood beatings. Vivian, my loving wife has promised a pie made from the Saskatoon berries I

picked yesterday, and a slice will taste good with a hot cup of tea.

As I put my gardening tools away, the sounds of young voices draw near. Tiny hands and arms pull and hug me around my legs. I bend down to return the hugs of my grandchildren and tenderly pat their heads, feeling the sun's warmth on their hair. Vivian is here also, and the two children, a girl and boy, run back to catch their grandmother's hand and drag her into the garden toward the raspberry patch. Jumping up and down in their colorful summer clothing, excited to return to Grandpa's garden, the children move like butterflies caught in the breeze. Soon they blend in against the backdrop of hollyhocks and lavatera, growing along the garden path, before disappearing into the raspberry patch. I find a pail and follow the sound of their laughter.

But despite the joy they provide, watching them grow triggers painful memories. I must confront the past. When my grandchildren are grown up and ready to hear it, they need to know my story, and know who I am, and so it is time to write it all down, for I am old.

Ross Reid

*"The humble lines which here I trace years
may not change nor age efface. They may
be read though valued not, when he who
penned them is forgot."*



Early Days



Archives of Manitoba
Agriculture—Machinery c. 1920 (64)

My mother passed away when I was an infant. I do not have many stories about her. Fortunately she had been good friends with a neighbour who owned a Brownie camera. The resulting legacy is a handful of treasured black and white photographs.

During a visit to the coast, to see my uncle, he gave me a worn photo album. The inside cover is inscribed, “To mother, Love Lydia.” This album travelled across country from my mother’s hands to my grandmother, and then to my uncle, and I am so thankful to have it now.

In one photograph, I am swaddled in a blanket, sitting on my mother's lap. Four-year-old sister Annie and two-year-old brother Jimmy are also in the photograph, dressed in winter jackets and matching toques. They stand close, embraced in Mother's protective arms. Her thin face looks straight into the camera's lens and I see her love as she held us tight.

This photo was taken in front of Dad's threshing machine during the spring, when the last remnants of snow can still be seen trapped in the tall grass. I must have been a couple of months old. Jimmy and Annie, with eyes closed and smiles on upturned faces have their little bodies pressed into mother. Their faces reflect the love bestowed on them. They look carefree, as children ought to be. I am in the middle of this warmth and can imagine still, Annie's red curls from under her white toque and Jimmy's deep blue eyes.

Other photos show mother's profile only, as she tends to her children during a church picnic and today I see the same soft facial features reflected in my granddaughter. Mother and Annie wear matching strands of pearl necklaces. I imagine how tenderly she must have placed the strings of jewelry over my sister's neck as a devoted Queen would to her princess. Perhaps the necklaces had been a family heirloom. Where they might be today, I do not know.

In another picture, I am sitting on my mother's knee and she is cradling me and her head is down. I can imagine her caressing the top of my head with her lips and maybe she sung a comforting lullaby to me. To think this is how a mother should love her child leaves a deep ache inside of me.

Dad is in some of these photographs too. There is one of him driving a team of horses and another with him standing in a wagon box holding a pitchfork. The pictures make him look the part of a farmer but he had no background in it. He was university educated but not in Agriculture, the land he purchased was rocky and poor. He was not a farmer.

I have another picture of him as a young man, tall and dressed in gentleman's clothing. It must have been taken during the late 1800s during his university days in England or when he travelled abroad. University students often went abroad in exchange programs to further their educations. So it was for my dad. He has one arm around a school chum, and when I look at their vested suits with watch chains, I can only think that Dad came from a prosperous family. What is more interesting is that his friend, who is dressed equally well, is of colour, East Indian perhaps, and that tells me that Dad was not prejudiced.

I was told he came to Canada because of his health but I think his family in England may have suggested he try to make a new life here. He likely had heard farming was good from his Aunt Emily who married into the Kendal family. Emily and her husband Jeremy had moved to Canada and purchased a homestead. Dad followed them out and made his way to the Prairies, working on local farms before settling on his own homestead.

In the early years, Dad had the means to hire farm workers, including mother's only sibling, John. Crops were abundant and the farm was thriving.

Then everything changed when the drought arrived during the Thirties and hopes of continuing prosperity died. If Dad had wanted to return to England, even for a visit, he could not have afforded the cost. Then again, he was enmeshed in the farm and community activities, including serving as chairman for the local school board.

I look again at the photograph of us in front of the threshing machine. It is the only photo of my mother where she is looking straight into the camera. I sense she knew her time was short and that she would not live long enough to see her children grow. The lens has captured her determined look as if it was important to her that we have a permanent memory of her love. It is the last photograph of her. She died the following year, on the eve of the

Great Depression. In the gauntness of her face, I see what the harshness from living off the land has done to her. I am haunted by it still.

I can hold these precious photos with their stories in one hand, yet I have more of them than stories of my mother. As children, it was a shame we did not ask Dad questions, such as how he met Mother or what she was like, but questions were not asked back then.

I so wish we had.

My first memory of my father is at harvest time when he lifted me onto the broad back of a draft horse, one of four harnessed to the binder machine. It was routine for Dad to take us small children out to the fields.

Annie and Jimmy were already sitting on top of their horses. Dad's hand felt strong and warm against my back while he positioned my fingers around each hame on top of the horse's collar. My legs were too short for the horse's broad back and I sat in an awkward position. Travel to the field was a challenge. I kept sliding off and would lose my grip on the hames when my horse walked across the uneven ground. Every step seemed to pull me down and I concentrated on watching Jimmy on his horse, riding in front of me.

"Ross, hold tight!" Dad called out from where he stood. I hung on but my attention turned to the scenery around me. I knew Uncle John and the hired men were working in the next field. All available hands were needed to help bring in the crop.

I lost my grip again. Dad dropped the reins to reposition me on my horse and with a gentle touch he patted my fingers back into place on top of each hame.

"Almost there!"

I looked down into Dad's deep blue eyes, his caring tone and smiling face warmed me. He must have known that it had been a

struggle for me to stay on the horse.

We arrived at the field and Dad lifted me off my horse before helping my sister and Jimmy.

“Annie, you’re in charge of tea!” Dad said as he placed a syrup pail, containing a mixture of tea and milk, down on the ground next to us.

We watched Dad guide the team, towing the binder to cut the crop. The horses worked hard pulling the noisy machine up and down the steep ravine. The sounds were muffled when the machine was down in the ravine and I could only see the top of Dad’s head. It seemed the horses did not have to make any effort and when they appeared in sight again, I had a clear view of the prongs that kicked out the tied sheaves, golden bundles of wheat that slid off the carrier onto the ground.

Fascinated, I watched the team trudge on, sensing the power in each of those wondrous animals. They did not seem to mind the work and I think they liked to use their strength. Tails swooshing, wearing meshing around their muzzles to keep the flies off their noses, the horses pulled the binder around the field. The binder was designed in such a way that the horses walked on the edge of the field on the stubble, never on the uncut grain. The stubble left behind was rough to walk on as we children well knew when we ran through it in our bare feet.

I enjoyed watching the massive bull wheel that turned over and over underneath Dad’s seat and listened to the sounds of the rolling sprockets and chains that coordinated the reel of slats. The slats turned and pulled the stalks of grain into the sickles and dropped them onto a canvas rolling table. A large needle threaded with binder twine came around and tied off the stalks into a sheaf. Dad sat upright in the seat and operated the levers that tipped the binder machine closer to the ground to catch the crop where it grew short from lack of rain. When five tied sheaves landed on the carrier, he pushed another lever with his left foot to drop these onto the ground.

There were few trees to sit under for shade as our land consisted of rolling hills. We were thirsty from the hot sun. Every so often Dad stopped his work to take a sip from the tea pail after offering us a drink. Annie couldn't open the pail as the lid was on too tight. Dad held the heavy pail carefully up to my lips. The warm tea tasted good as it dribbled down my throat and I could smell the leather scent from his gloves.

Dad went back to work the team and we passed the time catching grasshoppers. It was amusing to predict the direction they might jump. The insects' bodies felt moist in my hands and their long antennae quivered inside my closed palms. Once we tired of this, Annie played "Mother." Annie's stories and playacting kept mother's nurturing ways alive for us. Adopting an authoritative high-pitched voice, she stroked and tenderly patted us on top of our heads. Alternating between Jimmy and me, she cupped our chins with her open palm and kissed each of us on an upheld cheek, saying, "One for you and one for you."

"Now children sit still," she said as she wagged her finger at each of us and poured imaginary tea. She busied herself keeping us occupied as we must have whimpered at times. The day was long and hot in the open field and we brushed the flies away from our faces, waiting for Dad to finish his work. I would sit back and watch what he was doing. The smell of sweet fresh cut grain floated into the air.

I changed positions to sit between Jimmy and Annie and propped myself up with my palms behind me. I stretched my legs out trying to extend them beyond Jimmy and Annie's. It was no use. My legs were just too short. I started to get up and Annie gripped my arm.

She grasped my forearm. "Don't you wander now. Remember last time. Dad won't like it." I returned to my spot. She released her grip and patted my arm. "Good boy."

I occupied myself by digging my fingers into the warm dark earth.

Annie was referring to a time earlier in the season, during seeding. I had wandered away from the field to explore the grove of trees beyond. After not finding anything too interesting in the grove, I had walked along a path to a wheat field where the tall beige colored stalks swayed in the wind over my head. I had walked and walked until I came to a clearing lined with wolf willows. Feeling the effects of the afternoon sun, I found an abandoned badger hole in the wolf willows and curled up inside for a sleep. I woke up when I heard voices and stuck my head out. A neighbour spotted my white cap and carried me to my father's side.

"Ross, did you know the whole countryside was looking for you?" Dad's voice quavered. It was wrong to wander off and I had caused him precious time when he had to organize a search party. The worried look on his face showed he was not angry and I saw another emotion there and knew it was love.

Not long after that, Dad hired the neighbour's daughter to babysit us and make meals. She had finished school. She did not live with us. I learned later that she planned to marry her fiancé and move to the west coast. She also wanted to take me with them. I do not know when she asked Dad. Maybe I squirmed under her hand while she said the words, but he did not allow the adoption. He must have known I needed a mother. It is possible he wanted to keep us together so we would take over the farm in time. That was the expectation in those days. Maybe my great aunt Emily had discouraged the plan also.

We kids had to be kept busy. On one particular day while the neighbour's daughter and Annie were in the kitchen, Dad dressed Jimmy and me in felt boots so we could walk through the snow to the well. The well had a windlass, a wooden frame on top with a crank that carried the pail up and down on a rope. The cover over the well was stuck with ice from past times where water had sloshed and froze. Dad used his axe to chop an opening large

enough for the pail. Then Dad straddled himself over the opening and cranked the windlass to lower the pail to bring up fresh water.

A piece of ice fell. The echo of the sound when it plopped sent chills through me. A cold reminder that it was a deep well. When Dad slipped on a hump of built up ice, I gasped, fearful that he might fall down inside and drown in the water but he caught himself and laughed.

“That was close!”

The expression on my face must have suggested I needed reassurance.

“I’m alright, Ross!”

He filled two buckets and carried them, one in each hand back up to the house. Jimmy and I followed close behind. I mimicked Jimmy who stepped inside each of Dad’s large footprints. I tried, but it was difficult with my short legs. I wavered and fell down in the snow tracks. Jimmy helped me up. We caught up with Dad and imitated him by exaggerating his gestures, making slow hip movements, pretending to carry heavy pails of water. If Dad knew what we were up to, he never let on.

Dad worked tirelessly around the year. Every October the beef cattle had to be herded back home from the government pasture where they had spent the summer. The pasture was twelve miles away and we all went together to bring the herd home. The cattle may have been thin when they left for pasture each April but they had rounded out well by the end of the season. Our neighbours, the Starlings, did not have much pasture either and our cows and theirs left together. It was a job to get them back home. When the cows headed the wrong way, Dad yelled from atop his horse, “Jesuschristandmarywept!” I did not like to hear him swear but no doubt he was frustrated.

After being away for such a long time, it was work for Dad and the Starlings to herd the cattle into the yard. Once the cows

were inside our fence, they remembered the farm and picked up speed for the water trough. Jimmy and I ran after them, giggling and laughing out loud. The grownups were by this time talking amongst themselves. Everyone could relax again.

Crocuses were the first spring flower to poke through the clumps of snow. Jimmy and I had picked the crocuses that grew down the slope of the ravine. We liked to pick them for Annie as they were her favourite.

“Thank you Ross!” Annie exclaimed as she admired the bunch of wild crocuses I held up in my thin hands. “I’ll put them in water.”

Annie climbed up onto a chair to find a mason jar from the kitchen cupboard for the purple and white streaked flowers. Standing in the water, the stems looked twice as thick.

Now that the neighbour’s daughter had married and moved away, Annie had taken on more tasks in the kitchen and the pride in her face told me she felt important in what she could manage, despite still being a child herself.

“You best get back to Jimmy now,” Annie said before turning back to her dishes, humming a song. I left to find Jimmy standing outside the door.

He waved and called out, “This way, Ross.”

Jimmy was good at keeping me amused and out of trouble. Time was heavy for us young boys. I was three years-old by now and Jimmy about five. Both of us were too young to be assigned chores. Jimmy was always able to invent a game for us to play, or sometimes we followed Dad’s hired man, Bryan Starling, around the farm. Bryan was the neighbour’s eldest son and his Dad often came over to help keep our machinery running.

Bryan walked the quarter mile over to our farm to plow the fields in the spring and to work on other jobs throughout the year. Even as a teenager, Bryan seemed to know more about farming

than Dad. The Starlings were established farmers.

When the machinery wasn't running, Jimmy and I crawled over the equipment pretending to check things out. I liked to turn the grease cups on and off and peer inside. I guess young boys are curious or maybe I wanted to know what it was like to take care of these things. It seemed that Bryan and his dad were forever refilling the grease cups throughout the operation of the machinery. This day the machinery was at rest and Bryan had another job in mind.

"Boys, you can help gather up gopher tails," he said, tossing several old peanut butter tins in our direction. "Gophers are thick this year. Can't walk more than three steps before coming across another hole. No good."

Gophers had become a problem. It was bad news if a horse stepped into a gopher hole and twisted a leg. When the plow blade was dragged through the earth, gophers were turned out of their holes and darted in between the horses' feet to safety. If not, they were trampled under a hoof. The municipality had decided to place a bounty of one cent per tail to encourage farmers to eradicate the rodents.

We followed Bryan to another gopher hole. He knelt down and set a snare made from binder twine and placed this over the burrow. Holding the end of the twine in one hand, and a large stick in the other, he waited. When the gopher poked his head through the twine, Bryan gave a quick jerk. The gopher's tiny front feet clawed the air and his arms, outstretched, wavered helplessly. Bryan clubbed the gopher on the head with his stick, until the animal was dead. A bit of blood seeped out of the gopher's mouth and the eyes had popped wide. Bryan pulled off the fur from the tail and dropped this onto the ground for us to pick up. The bony part of the tail stayed with the rest of the carcass for the crows, circling in the distance.

Bryan changed tactics and filled the gopher holes that were

closer to the ravine, with water, forcing the rodents out. I felt sorry for them as they tried to escape from under his stick. As we made our way down the field, gophers stood up on their hind legs, chattering to one another, and scampering away.

When we could not fit any more tails into the tins, Bryan took them home. I never saw any money and I do not believe that Jimmy did either. I never asked anyone about it.

Later on that season it became apparent that the gophers that had escaped Bryan's extermination efforts were still destroying the crops. Dad gave each of us a small pail of grain that I think was laced with strychnine. The tainted grain had a sweet smell and even though I knew it was poison, I thought about eating it. I was always hungry and wished I had something to eat to quiet my growling stomach and appease my constant hunger.

"Carry this out and put a spoonful of it down inside each gopher hole," Dad said.

"Make sure you put that grain down far inside the holes."

I must have looked puzzled.

"Ross, make sure you do so the dog won't get at it."

I did not understand, but back then, children did not ask questions. I guess if I was hungry the dog was too. One thing was sure a gopher's life was a short one on the farm.

Jimmy and I loved to play pranks on people, especially hired men. There was the time Jimmy hunted up two long branches and gave one to me. I took it but I was perplexed. The branch was quite long and I needed to hold it with both my hands, to keep it from hitting the ground. We walked out to the pasture where Ed, the hired man, had made several small manure piles with the stone boat. Each summer night, after the wind had died, Ed lit one of the manure piles to keep the mosquitoes away from the livestock. The horses stood in a circle around the smudge, with their heads hanging over the smoke, swishing their tails.

Jimmy tapped his finger to his lips, motioning to me to keep quiet. Still holding my branch, I followed him, to hide behind one of the manure piles. He raised a finger to his lips again, reminding me to keep quiet.

Ed, who was a few feet away, squatted over the bare ground with his overalls drooped around his ankles. Ed never used the backhouse. In winter, he preferred the barn because it was warmer inside, but in summer, hired men often relieved themselves out in the fields. Then I understood the game. I cautiously stepped out from behind the manure pile and reached out as far as possible, with my long branch.

Ed shivered. I poked him again. Then Jimmy took a turn with his long branch. Ed turned his head around.

“Get out of here!” he hollered.

Scampering away, holding our sides and giggling, we ran down the path and out of harm’s way. We knew good-natured Ed would not come after us or retaliate. We liked Ed a lot and often followed him around the farm while he did his work. Ed slept in our house. He sometimes found things for us to do, like holding a harness or carrying empty pails and he always had a kind word for us. I like to think he did not mind our young boisterous ways as he must have remembered what it was like to be a youngster.

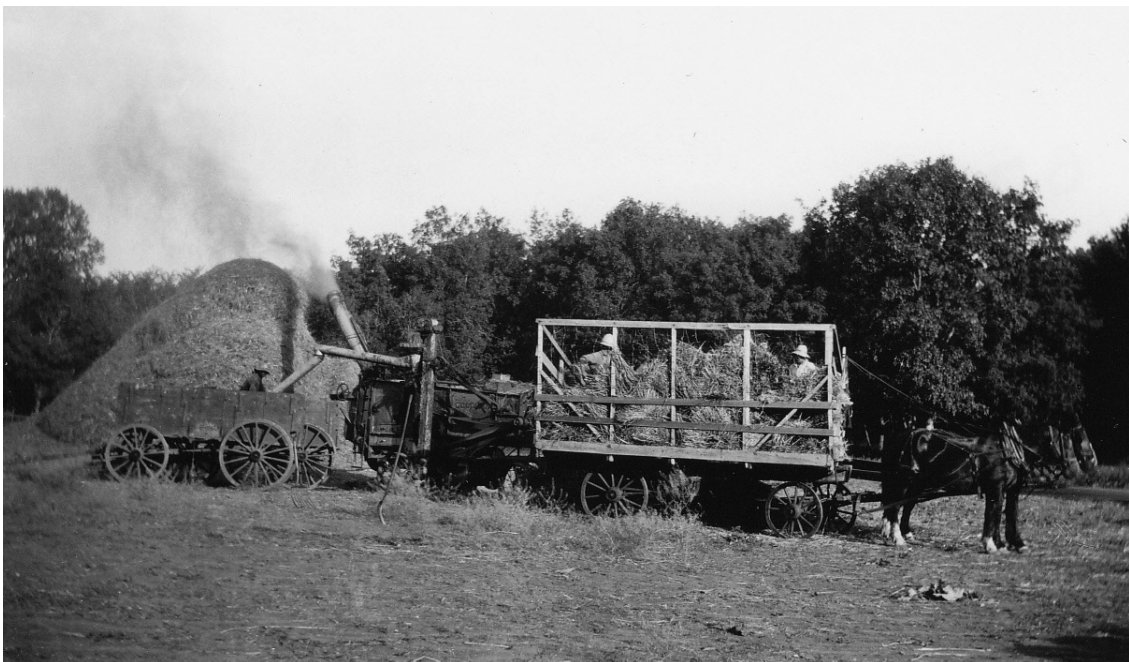
We were full of mischief and Dad allowed us to tag after Ed and Bryan while they went about their chores as it gave us something to do. Those were carefree days.

*“What are little boys made of?
What are little boys made of?
Frogs and snails
And puppy-dogs tails,
That’s what little boys are made of.
What are little girls made of?
What are little girls made of?
Sugar and spice
And all that’s nice,
That’s what little girls are made of.”*

J.O. Halliwell



The Housekeeper



Archives of Manitoba
Agriculture—Harvesting— c 1937. Threshing (71)

The two or three years following mother's death, must have been difficult for Dad. He had to run the farm and look after us small children even with help from the neighbour's daughter. Annie was six years-old, too young to run a household and babysit Jimmy and me.

After the neighbour's daughter married and left for the west coast, I was told Dad had placed an advertisement in the city newspaper for a housekeeper. A farm worker named Morag, who came from far away, had answered the ad and was hired. I do not recall when she moved in but they say first impressions are important.

With Morag's arrival, our lives changed overnight. The

abuse started the very first day when Dad left us in her care to work in the fields.

“Go sit at the table,” Morag said. I found a place on the bench between Annie and Jimmy. I watched Morag take an apron down from the hook by the cupboard and put this over her bib overalls, before preparing our oatmeal. Morag dressed like a man; she did not wear skirts or dresses. I am sure the apron belonged to my mother. It looked out of place on Morag.

She towered over us, wearing a pained expression of disdain on her face. Her short straight black hair with bangs cut high over her forehead, made her look stern. Her expression matched her demeanor.

Morag turned back to the woodstove. Bored, I gave Jimmy a kick under the table and he made a sharp outcry and gave me a returning kick. By then, we were both giggling. It was common for us to act up, yet I was not prepared for what happened next.

Morag rushed to Jimmy’s side of the table and cuffed his ear with the back of her hand. Jimmy yelled and tried to protect his ears with his hands but he wasn’t quick enough. I stared at Jimmy’s head as it bobbed up and down with each smack. Then I felt a sharp pain on the side of my head and realized it was left by Morag’s hand.

“Dad! Dad!” Annie yelled.

Morag turned from me and looked at Annie. “You be quiet or you’ll get one too.”

I trembled at her tone. Annie was quiet. My ear felt hot and there was a ringing noise in my head. I had never been slapped before. It was a terrible moment and I sat on the bench between my siblings knowing that Dad could not intervene as he was working in the fields with the team.

No doubt we looked unkempt, and Morag decided to cut our hair. She started with me. Using the hand clippers, she pushed the metal prongs of the clippers hard against my skull. It hurt so much

because she pushed faster than her hand could work the clippers. She did not have patience and seemed to be in a hurry. When I pulled away, she cuffed me on the ears to force me to stand still. She finished the job by cutting my bangs short with a pair of scissors. Jimmy and Annie each had a haircut too and once done, we had bob cuts similar to Morag's. She did not believe in style.

Hair cuts were given three or four times a year, but bath times were more frequent and never on a routine.

Morag had hauled the round galvanized washtub, filled with well water into the front yard. Water sloshed out and small patches of mud formed on the ground. Jimmy and Annie had disappeared.

"Get over here and take your clothes off," Morag commanded.

I must have hesitated as I was used to having a bath in the warmth of the kitchen and it seemed foreign to bathe outside.

"Hurry up!"

Wrapping my arms around my shivering body, I stepped into the tub of cold water.

"Sit!"

I willed myself to do as I was told and it took a couple of practice sit-downs. Morag scrubbed me with a rough cloth. I had trouble sitting upright. Grabbing the rims on the sides of the tub, I tried to keep myself steady as Morag rubbed the cloth hard against my spine. She jerked me by one arm, yanking me to a standing position to wash my backside. Her hands, rough from work, were not gentle. I did not remember the neighbour's daughter ever treating me like this and I started to cry.

"What a clumsy, dirty boy," Morag spat out the words between gritted teeth.

She slapped me across the face with a wet hand causing me to lose my balance. When I fell back into the tub, water splashed up into her face.

The surprised look on her face changed to one of anger.

"You little bugger," she said through clenched teeth.

She pushed my head under the water and held me down. Scared, I had not had time to hold my breath. I emerged, coughing out the dirty water.

“Shit in your ear.” She lathered the cloth and rubbed hard against my ears, swiping my head with angry circular motions. Terrified of drowning, I blew repeatedly at the surface to keep water away from entering my mouth. She pushed my head under the water three more times in quick succession.

“Dry off,” she said, and threw a worn piece of towel at my gasping chest. She was finished with me. She stood up and called out for Jimmy. *She’s done with me*, I thought. *It’s his turn now*. When Jimmy did not answer, she called again, in an angry tone of voice. She yelled and cursed louder and louder. I had never heard that before and fear grew inside me.

“Why are you still standing here, Ross?” she said.

“I’mmmm, I’mmm, getting my clothes,” I stammered. I forced myself back into the same dirty clothes and bolted for the safety of the ravine.

Later that evening, I had a problem untying my boot laces. Whenever the laces in my short boots became wet, they were impossible to untie. My fingers were not strong enough to remove the knot and I was scared to let Morag know. She would blame me for making the knot and I would be rewarded with a cuff to my head that may or may not turn into a full beating.

Earlier in the day, Jimmy and I had been filling the horse trough and water sloshed over my boots. When Morag sent us to bed, we stopped in the kitchen to remove jackets and footwear. I discovered a knot had formed in one of my laces. I removed the free boot and hid in our bedroom to work on the stubborn lace. Jimmy tried too but couldn’t manage to untie the knot. I could not get Annie’s help as she was already in bed. I did not dare go to bed with my boot on. The lace was knotted at my ankle and I tried to untie it some more and Jimmy tried again. He had to give up

and crawled into bed. I sat on the floor in the dark and worried that Morag might find out that I had not taken off my boot. Thankfully she had retired for the night. The kitchen light had been turned off.

Our radio had stopped working and Dad had gone to a neighbours' to listen to the boxing match. Dad left the house on many evenings.

"Get going on your shank's mare," Morag would say when Dad mumbled about going out to a meeting at the town hall, or to the school board. Many times he went to the neighbours to listen to the wireless or to play cards.

Those were black nights for me when Dad left the house. With Dad out of the way and Annie and Jimmy behind closed bedroom doors, times were convenient for Morag to deliver postponed floggings.

I sat on the floor for what seemed liked hours. My uncomfortable and trapped foot sweated in the rubber boot. If I had been wearing socks, although we could not afford ones, there may have been a chance for the boot to slide off.

I dozed until the back door opened. *Dad!* He struck a match to light the kitchen lantern.

Like a bug that darts across the room when the light is turned on, I scuttled out of the bedroom to intercept him as he walked down the hall.

"What's this?" Dad said.

It never occurred to me to say, "I can't get my boot untied." Instead, I stuck out my leg.

Right away Dad saw what was wrong with my boot and knelt down on the floor beside me. He took a nail out of his pocket, and worked this inside the middle of the knot. I was relieved to feel the pressure release when he tenderly removed the boot from my sweaty foot. He helped me up and looked into my face and grinned. Everything was fine again. I put my boots away

and crept into bed. The skin around my ankle was sore from my repeated tries to remove the boot but at least now I was free.

Life was always better when Dad was around.

Belle, one of our younger mares, was sick from either distemper or sleeping sickness and Dad had separated her from the rest of the horses to prevent the disease from spreading.

Within days, she became too weak to stand up. Dad moved her into the shade of the cottonwood poplar trees in front of the house to escape the strong rays from the summer sun.

Dad was proud of those cottonwood trees. Two decades earlier, when he had settled on the homestead, he had planted three long rows west of the house. He called it his “shelter belt” and by now the trees towered over a row of lilacs that he had also planted.

I kept vigil over Belle and attempted to make her comfortable underneath the cool shade of the trees. Her rapid panting caused her to be in constant motion. It was not an easy time. Dad, Annie and Jimmy visited but Morag did not appear or seem interested in assisting.

I crouched down in the long grass behind a tree and my foot hit the bottom of a discarded baby bath basin made of blue enamel. Maybe my mother had washed me in it under the cool of the trees, during hot summer days. I imagined her gentle hands, caring words and soft caresses.

I turned my attention to Belle and watched the foam come out of her nose as she gasped, trying to get air. I touched her face and her eyelids responded and the long lashes fluttered. The vet had visited again and left more disinfectant. Dad had also made a mixture of creosote and water, and I wiped her hide down with this to discourage the biting flies and mosquitoes. When that was done, I stroked her hot and panting body. A small ball of crawling white maggots was busy at the site of a raw sore that had formed on her flank. Dad had said that the bugs would help to heal the

sore. I hoped Belle would get better. A young mare was needed on the farm. Every so often Dad and the hired man turned her over, by pulling on the rope that was tied to her back legs.

I brought water and tried to get Belle to take a drink from the pail, but she did not keep her head upright long enough and lowered her shoulder back down and panted hard. I patted her flank, careful to avoid the sore and the busy maggots.

“You rest now and get better. I’ll be back,” I said.

When I returned, Belle’s panting had stopped.

I went to find Jimmy. He needed to see the change in Belle.

Jimmy bent over the horse and then straightened up. “She’s dead.”

I was surprised. “What do you mean?”

“She’s not with us anymore.”

Belle dead?

I looked at the young mare. I expected her to open her eyes and start the panting again. Her death did not seem real to me. Belle was a part of my family and she had always been there for us. It was hard to think she was gone.

“I’ll tell Dad,” Jimmy said.

Dad came and knelt down beside Belle. He caressed her several times, saying, “Belle, my poor Belle.”

He stayed there for a minute and stood up. Jimmy and I followed him back to the barn where he hitched the team to the stone boat. Then Dad and the hired man rolled Belle’s body up into the stone boat and transferred her to a pile of manure. They covered her with straw and Dad lit a match and walked away. Jimmy and I stood at a distance to watch the funeral pyre.

By harvest time, Dad was back in the fields working the team with his binder machine. Two hired men walked behind, picking up bundled sheaves, stacking six or seven together into the shape of a tepee, or “stook.” This allowed the rain to run off

the sheaves and prevented the kernels from falling out of the heads of grain before threshing.

Morag sent Jimmy and me with the noon lunch that she, with Annie's help, had prepared for us to take out to Dad and the binder crew. Taking the noon lunch to the field workers was something small boys could do and we were always greeted with a warm welcome. I toted the honey pail filled with tea. Jimmy carried the wooden box of sandwiches. It was a special square box with a veneered lid that slid on and off. The words, "Made in England" were stamped on the bottom. I presume that Dad must have brought the box with him when he came over to Canada. Jimmy had to carry the box with both hands; it was that large.

Dad called out to the team to rest. He stepped down from the binder machine to walk over to us, as we waited at the edge of the field, ahead of the stubble. The hired men tended to the team.

We set the lunch and tea on the ground.

"What are my boys up to?" Dad called out as he walked towards us. As he drew closer he said, "I see you brought us our lunch!" Dad waved to the men to come over saying, "Take a rest from that stooking and get over here for something to eat."

The men clamored around and someone picked up the box and passed the sandwiches out.

Dad gently pulled me to his side and combed his fingers through my hair, caressing my head with the palm of his hand. It felt good and comforting. I sat down at his feet while he reached out to Jimmy and did the same.

When the crew finished their lunch, the emptied wooden box and honey pail were entrusted back into our care. Dad waved us off. "Thanks boys! Back home now."

We decided to take the same route back across the fields and stop at the stand of scrub popular trees where we had seen a large round mass embedded high up, in the crook of a branch. Upon closer inspection, it looked like a ball wrapped in grey paper. *Wow!*

“It looks like a pretty good football!” I said excitedly.

“I think we should take it home!” Jimmy replied.

Jimmy climbed up the tree trunk. Hoisting himself, he swung a leg over a bough that swayed under his weight. If he had seen the “sentries” posted on the outside of the opening in the grey mass, right then, he might have decided to climb back down. Instead he stood on the bough and leaned into the branches to pull the grey paper ball out of the tree. I stood on the ground beneath, and stretched my arms over my head, ready for him to pass it down to me.

Jimmy dropped the grey paper mass. It hit the ground with a thud. I expected it to bounce but it did not. *Oh no!*

A black cloud of angry wasps flew out of the nest and Jimmy descended down the tree. It was a rapid attack when the wasps surrounded us. We ran home, crazed from the stinging wasps, slapping them away from us and crying loudly. We were not able to outrun them and the pain was unbearable. As young boys we did not know wasps made nests in trees and my only experience up to then had been with a bumble bee stinging my big toe after running through a field in my bare feet.

Our agony was great and once we reached home, we headed to the well. The cold water helped some and we also tried mud, a good remedy for bee and wasp stings, but we were so covered in bites that it made little difference to our suffering.

When we presented ourselves to Morag, she laughed. She had no sympathy for our misery. My body was aching and I thought she might offer some word of condolence. Instead she said, “Where’s my box?”

Her happy mood changed when she learned we had left the wooden box and honey pail back at the base of the tree. She looked disturbed yet I could not believe she expected us to return to the wasp nest. Her top dentures shifted. Morag had poor fitting dentures and I could always tell I was in trouble when those

dentures started to shift.

“Get going.”

We had no choice but to return and retrieve the box and pail. When we arrived at the spot, wasps buzzed erratically in and around the tree before reentering the hole we saw in the bottom of the nest. It was a large nest and there must have been hundreds of wasps living in it.

Thankfully, the insects seemed too disoriented to bother us again.

It took days for the painful welts to disappear, especially the worst ones around my eyes.

“You boys are too smart for your britches,” Morag sneered, wearing a smug look. “Maybe you learned your lesson.”

“It is easier to pull down, than to build up.”



Thirst



Archives of Manitoba
Agriculture — Harvesting — c. 1900. Manitoba (1)

Morag had a convincing way with Dad with lots of things, including her belief that young boys should be helping around the farm, so one hot summer day found Jimmy and me pulling weeds in the garden patch. We were under her command and learning that work was never ending. She sent Jimmy and me to the garden patch most days now.

She was working nearby hoeing, her face shielded by a

straw hat. Morag liked to use the flat hoe that Dad had the blacksmith make from a pitchfork for her. The middle tine had been removed and pieces of short metal were welded on the outside tines. Dad kept the metal edges sharpened. I'm not sure if Morag had suggested it, but it seemed to work well for her.

"Finish weeding and start on the potato bugs," she called out. She dropped her hoe and without another word, turned toward the house where Annie was scrubbing floors. She did not tell us why she had decided to leave.

When I tired of kneeling, I squatted to pull more weeds. To a small boy it was tedious work under the sun. Jimmy was working at the other end of the row. I thought about the worm that had come out of me several days ago. Something had moved inside me and crawled out from underneath my bib coveralls. I had looked down to see a long worm. It had been thin, whitish looking and it wiggled across the dirt before disappearing down the row of vegetables. It gave me a fright. I was fearful that there might be more of them eating my insides out. I never said anything to anyone, not even Jimmy. Thankfully, I had not seen another since and I moved over to the row of onions to check for weeds.

In the fall, it was a favourite job to brush the dry dirt away from the onions. This allowed the bulbs to cure. Fried or boiled, Dad loved his onions. I was thinking about this when I accidentally pulled a small onion shoot out of the ground. I hid it in my pocket to dispose of later. If I stuck it back into the dry ground Morag would spot the wilted leaf. "Why did you do that, Ross?" Mistakes and accidents were not allowed yet if Dad knew he probably would have laughed, saying, "Throw it back and by next week it'll turn into an onion tree!"

When the weeding was finished, we moved to the potato patch and Jimmy found our old baking powder tins in the rows. He passed one to me. I found our short sticks Dad had made especially for us with the handsaw. The ends had been finished

into a flat surface so that we could crush the bugs we collected in our tins, dead.

The fat orange bugs, half an inch in length were easy to spot with their distinctive black stripes down their wings. When there wasn't money to buy Paris Green, an insecticide that Dad mixed with water to sprinkle over the plant tops, we picked the bugs by hand. It was time consuming work so when we could afford Paris Green that was a more efficient method. The bugs died on contact and the poison dried to a greenish colour, repelling any wayward bugs.

We worked up and down the long rows, the heat of the sun beating down on our bare heads, picking and crushing.

It paid to check under the leaves for clusters of orange-coloured eggs and rip off any infected leaves and drop these into our tins. We also picked any immature potato bugs; they were soft, brownish looking and slimy to touch.

Jimmy stopped to pull out a thistle from his foot. I kept watch over our tins and tapped the sides looking for any live bugs.

"I'm thirsty," Jimmy said. He sat in the dirt between the rows, examining the soles of his feet for more thistles. I sat down on the ground near him, and looked for any white worms that may have come out of me. I was thirsty too. I looked up towards the house.

"Where do you think she is?" I asked.

"In the house I guess. Maybe the barn."

"Do you think she knows we stopped working?"

"I don't care. I'm too thirsty."

Jimmy had more confidence than me.

There was no point in sneaking back to the house for a drink because Morag controlled the dipper. It was up to her if we could have a drink. When we asked, sometimes we were given one, often not. When she agreed, she hung onto the dipper and jerked it out of our mouths before we had had enough. I hated to have to ask her for a drink of water and I think she enjoyed controlling the

dipper. Perhaps she did not allow me extra as I wet the bed.

I did not think my problem of bed wetting was from drinking too much water. I lived in continual fear of her and I think that's why I wet the bed. The mornings she found my indiscretion, she cuffed me awake, hollering curses as I scrambled to get away from her angry blows. Perhaps my bedwetting was from her stories she tortured me with, making me listen when I did not want to.

Morag enjoyed telling tall tales and although I knew they were not true that did not stop me from reliving her stories in my head before going to sleep. I tried not to let on her tales caused me nightmares.

I recall one story quite vividly.

"Ross, did I ever tell you about the thirsty man?" She wasn't expecting me to answer. She went on with her tale. "There was a man who was so thirsty that he drunk cup after cup of water. Soon his belly was full but he was still so thirsty. So he drunk more water and his belly grew bigger and bigger." Morag stopped to take a sip of her tea. "He couldn't see his feet, his belly was that big. And his cheeks bulged out from all that water." She made a motion with her hand to emphasize his size. "But he was still thirsty and thought he should have one more cup." Morag's face was animated and she enunciated each word. She was so convincing that I could feel his thirst.

Morag shoved her head inches from my face and puffed out her cheeks. She widened her eyes and waved her arms wildly to demonstrate the man's agony. She rapidly closed and opened her eyes and fluttered her hand over her chest, signaling his fate. She closed her eyes once more and settled her chin on her chest. A quiet half minute passed. I stared, and waited for her to open her eyes again.

"And then he busted open and bits of him went everywhere!" she shouted with glee.

I jumped back into my chair, and my body shook.

The look of terror I must have had on my face rewarded

Morag as her grin grew wider and her mouth opened to emit uncontrollable and malicious bouts of laughter. She enjoyed the effect her stories had on me. No wonder I had a bed wetting problem.

“I’m thirsty,” Jimmy said again, breaking into my thoughts.

The water in the ravine that bordered the yard site had dried up. Even the cows that spent their time standing in the cool wetness of the ravine had moved on. Any water to be found had dried up or was used up. And that left two places to find water; the drink pail in the house or the well.

“She’s in the house. Jimmy, I’m scared stiff of her. She’ll get mad.”

“Come on. I know a way.”

Going to the house to get a drink of water was out of the question. We were never allowed in during the day and besides, by this time she had returned. Other times, when we knew she was out, we took the chance of slipping into the house to steal water from the drink pail.

Getting to the well was risky. It meant crossing the yard where we would be visible from the house. Our thirst made us desperate and Jimmy had another plan.

Following his lead, I crawled toward the safety of the ravine. The grasshoppers almost gave us away, springing into the air like clothes pins, scattering their yellow-green bodies in all directions. I dropped to the ground on my belly to wait for the insects to resettle in their hiding places, underneath the dark leaves.

The ravine part of the yard was at a lower level of uneven ground so we hunched down, trying to make ourselves invisible in the most exposed areas, where the cows had grazed the ground clean. By this time, I was dying for water.

We made our way onward.

I had a hope that a bit of water might be standing in the bottom of the trough next to the well. This kept me motivated to

crawl on. In the bottom of the trough was a crevice that the cows could not reach. I thought there might be some water if the sun had not dried out the trough. I crawled inside and managed to get my mouth low enough for a drink. I had to push some grass and grit that must have fallen out of a cow's mouth, up onto the sides of the trough. The water was green and warm and I couldn't manage to capture enough of it. It was not satisfying. After seeing the little puddle of water standing in the trough, Jimmy must have been determined to find us water as he headed for the well.

I could see the water pail hanging from the windlass over the well. I did not think Jimmy dared risk trying to use it as the windlass could be seen from the house and it made a creaking noise when it was cranked. He knew how to use the windlass as Morag made him clean the well from time to time. Often, when the thirsty cows stood out in the pasture, facing into the hot breeze, they came on the run when they saw someone going to the well. Like us, they never seemed to get enough water. I hunkered down to the ground to avoid being seen. I hoped they would not see Jimmy either.

Whenever Morag assigned Jimmy to clean the well, I hid behind the backhouse to watch. I was deathly afraid of being ordered to go down that dark narrow hole in the ground. The well had to be fifty feet deep, yet I was fascinated to see what was going on. Jimmy did not seem scared but I worried he might slip and drown if the rope broke. There was nothing but the cribbing to cling onto. I was always anxious until the job was done and Jimmy was out of the well.

Our well was spring fed and the water, good tasting. Dad called it "hard water" and I guess it was from the iron content as the dipper had a reddish tinge to it. But the well often went dry and when this happened, the bottom needed to be cleaned out. It was a dirt bottom well, not gravel or sandy and clay often blocked the spring waters from coming through. Removing the clay

helped. Morag sent experienced Jimmy all the way to the bottom to shovel out the clay dirt. Morag had the job of cranking the pail back up on the windlass, emptying the pail and winding it back down to him to fill up again.

Like many farm families, we kept our cream down inside the coolness of the well. Every so often someone upset the cream pail. That meant a trip down the well to wipe the wooden cribbing clean. If that was not done, the water came up milky looking and sour tasting. When Jimmy was relegated to the task, he went down the well with ease, one foot inside the water pail, hanging with one hand to the rope while Morag lowered the windlass.

Jimmy was skilled and knew how to manage the windlass.

I watched as he cranked a bucket of well water up for us, dreading that Morag might be at the window behind a curtain. There was no sign of her. The clear ice-cold water tasted delicious and soon we had our fill. We sneaked back to the garden and carried on picking potato bugs. But I was still thirsty until I thought about Morag's exploding man.

A couple of hours went by when Dad called, "Gee haah!" from the road. *Dad's back with the team!*

I heard the harmony of horse hooves plod against the ground and the clinking of the metal rings attached to the harness. We ran to Dad who was finished for the day. The horses glistened with sweat from working in the fields and I could smell the rankness of sweat on their hides. They were well-trained and stood still in the yard to wait for Jimmy and Dad to remove their harnesses. The horses immediately rolled in the dirt. It was delightful to see their joy in being free. They loved to snort and clear their nostrils of dust, before trotting off to the barn, grateful for meager rations found in feedbags.

Our horses behaved peacefully with Dad but became nervous around Morag. She hit and poked them to move out of her way. Morag misused animals and I well knew the bewildered look of fear in their eyes whenever she was about. Their eyes bulged

and ears drew back. She often flogged a horse, cursing and hollering for the poor bewildered animal to move.

She may have had more experience than my dad with horses and farming, but Dad was gentle and kind when he worked our horses. She had no patience, unlike Dad who was careful to settle the bridle over the horse's head, talking softly while slipping the bit into the mouth. He was easy with the reins and worked confidently with the horses in turning them to the right, or left, moving forward or back, stops and go. Morag was forever breaking harness and I could sense the team's nervousness when Morag was at the end of the reins.

We followed Dad into the house for supper and after that he went to bed.

"You boys are staying out tonight," Morag stated and pushed us out before shutting the back door. "That way you'll be closer to piss in the bushes."

Morag was all knowing and the overseer had found us out.

*"When sliding down the banister of life,
Beware of slivers in your destination."*



Mother's Front Room



Archives of Manitoba
Agriculture — Machinery n.d. Plow (155)

“Aaacch!” Morag yelled.

Clouds of grey smoke billowed from the oven when she opened the door to reveal blackened loaves.

“Annie! Get over here!” Morag gestured impatiently for Annie to pull the bread pans from the woodstove.

The previous evening, Morag had mixed a batch of dough

and set up two pans on the woodstove's warming platform. It had been a good batch and the white dough had ballooned over the edges of the pans by morning. She had cut off these extra pieces and fried them up in lard. She called them scones, and I looked forward to having some as I was still hungry and that would make up for having to eat black crusty sandwiches at lunch time.

Annie carried the hot bread pans to the front room and set them on top of the closed keyboard of the piano to cool.

Irene Kendal had told me that our mother played piano at home and the organ in church. Irene, who had been fond of mother, had said, "Ross, your mother played her piano and the church organ beautifully. She always made time for her music. She helped on church committees too." I wasn't too sure what a committee was but it sounded good and gave me the feeling that mother had been an esteemed lady. Even Cora Meade, a neighbour, affirmed that my mother had been a member of the ladies' church auxiliary and quite involved in community activities. It was obvious that Irene and Cora still missed my mother but once Morag arrived, she forbade any talk of my mother.

If mother were still alive, I am sure she would have taught Annie how to play the piano. The instrument would have been revered and used for entertainment in the evenings and surrounded by relatives singing carols at Christmas. The front room must have been an inviting place to receive visitors back then. Since Morag's arrival, the settee had disappeared. Chairs and benches were moved in. No one played the piano now and Morag had no use for it. The keyboard was kept closed up and used as a bread board, an extension of the kitchen. At harvest it served as a buffet for plates of food for the threshing gang. Like all of us, mother's piano was put to work.

Often the front room was warm and bright from the sunlight that streamed through the two windows that faced south. The rest

of the house was usually in darkness as we did not have electricity. The coal oil lanterns never left the kitchen or Dad and Morag's bedroom. In the summer time, the windows framed the purple Cosmo flowers Morag grew in the front flower bed from seed she saved every year.

Morag turned the front room into a multipurpose one. She set up her egg incubator in this room. I wonder what my mother would have thought of that. It had a slide out drawer that housed a hundred eggs that she kept warm by the heat of a coal oil burner underneath. Morag was the only one who operated the incubator and she checked it faithfully, turning the eggs three times a day. When yellow chicks started to peck out of their shells, she removed their chirping bodies and carried them to the barn.

Cold winter days found us playing horses, and binder twine became pretend harnesses. Jimmy, Annie and I would gallop around the chairs and jump the benches. But when Morag arrived these playtimes were never allowed inside the house again.

Annie was sent to the kitchen and Jimmy and I churned butter in a used Rogers Syrup pail. We did not have a mechanical cream separator, like the Starlings had, or an abundance of milk to process. The Starlings owned twelve milking cows compared to our three. Morag skimmed the cream from the top of the milk and poured it into the tin pail. Jimmy and I sat at opposite ends on the floor with our legs outstretched, and rolled the heavy pail back and forth. Every so often, Morag stopped us and pried off the lid to let the air escape that had built up inside.

We rolled the pail carefully so that the lid did not fly off. I was filled with fear of being blamed if it did. It should have been an enjoyable task, even a game, to entertain us small children but I suppose Morag had us do it to keep us busy and out of trouble. The cream swished inside and after a long period of rolling the pail, the sound changed to a plop when the butter dropped inside and our work was done.

Another job we did in that room was to make rope with Dad; that was enjoyable. There were endless uses for handmade rope. Rope was needed for the well and to tie up the cows. Rope was used everywhere, anytime something had to be fastened down.

The rope machine was bolted to a heavy six foot plank that sat twenty feet away from the opposite end of the room. It had metal gears that meshed together inside. There were eight hooks in a circle on the rope machine and a larger hook was positioned in the centre of the eight. Dad wrapped twine from the binder box around a large hook nailed to the wall. Then he walked with the twine and wrapped it around one of the smaller hooks on the machine. He continued to wrap the twine around the large hook and back to the next hook on the machine. A number of trips were required depending on how thick he wished to make the rope.

We took turns cranking the rope machine that inched along the floor while the rope tightened. If it moved ahead too quickly, someone had to stand on the plank to slow it down to keep the rope from curling. When the rope was too heavy, Dad gave the final turns on the crank. Once that was done, he removed the rope off the hooks and knotted the ends to keep it from unraveling. That machine made good rope.

Rope making required time, space and patience, so Morag often was not involved. One time when Morag managed the plank, she decided to straddle the rope instead. I guess she did so to keep the new rope straight. Dad had a sense of humor and cranked the machine up as fast as he could do it, which caused the rope to catch the bottom of her pant legs. When the rope wrapped around her ankles and started up her legs, he cranked faster and faster. I saw a slight grin on his face when the rope spiraled upwards.

"You son of a bitch!" She let go of the plank and unwrapped the rope from her body and left the room.

Dad had a laugh and called out, “Come back I was only having some fun!”

She did not see the humor. That was the last time she helped to make rope, unless the Starlings who did not have a rope making machine, came over to use ours and then she did not seem to mind to help again.

One evening while Morag and Dad were milking the cows, I rummaged through the front room closet to look for a pair of running shoes for school. Mine had worn out and had holes in them. During the summer, I went about the farm in bare feet, to save my runners for school. When I was older, I wondered why we never had enough money to buy extra pairs of shoes. Nor was there money for socks so we never had any to wear inside our running shoes or felt boots in winter. Money was tight and Dad could only afford to buy one pair of runners for each of us at the beginning of the school year. Socks were a luxury.

I kept looking. There were two closets that housed all our clothing; one in the front room and another in the hallway. I was in unknown territory as Morag did not allow us to go through closets and drawers.

I was amazed to find a moth eaten red and white rugby sweater with matching shorts, wool socks and a red velvet cap. Dad must have brought the uniform with him when he moved to Canada. *All the way from England!* Dad was knowledgeable about sports yet he never took part in any games, unlike the Kendals. The stained sweater was rough to the touch. With my fingers, I outlined the insignia embroidered on the front. I did not know he had played rugby. Dad obviously held sports in high regard to have kept the uniform all this time. To think he had enough money to own a uniform back then but now could not afford socks. I thought about trying on the cap when I caught a glimpse of Morag’s shadow on the wall. I cowered in fear when she said, “You nosy bugger. Get out of there.”

Ever since Morag found me out, the front room was no longer an inviting place. My curiosity to explore the hallway closet was quashed and I ended up going to school with the same worn out runners. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained.*

“It is easy — terribly easy — to shake a man’s faith in himself. To take advantage of that to break a man’s spirit is devil’s work.”

George Bernard Shaw



New Arrivals



Archives of Manitoba
Agriculture — Ploughing Match 1938, Portage la Prairie (13)

I did not always know when Morag was pregnant but it seemed there was a baby in the house all the time.

Our housekeeper-turned-step-mother was now Mrs. Morag Reid. I cannot remember when Dad and Morag went to the city to

get married. It must have been a day trip though, as I do not recall them ever being away overnight. There was no mention of the marriage or any celebration, nor did anyone explain that she was now my stepmother.

In early years, it was a good indication that another baby was coming when the neighbour's wife came to stay with us. The birth was getting close when the doctor was summoned. Water was kept on the boil, ready for the doctor's command.

Birthing took a long time, and always seemed to happen in the middle of the night. The doctor would fall asleep in Dad's big leather chair in the kitchen and the snoring was loud enough to hear from our bedroom. I also listened to Morag's groaning and moaning as she endured hours of childbirth pain. I did not always feel sorry for her, thinking it was time she found out how harsh pain felt like.

One September morning, Dad sent me over to my cousins to help stook their barley field. Darren Kendal and I worked steady so that he could spend the afternoon studying for his school exams. After our stooking, Darren invited me to wash up at his well. I was not in a hurry to return home. He showed me his trick of pouring ice-cold water over our wrists and lower arms to cool off more rapidly.

"This day is longer than a country mile," Darren said. I guess he wasn't looking forward to the rest of the day, sitting upstairs in his room reading school books. I would have welcomed the opportunity. He took another sip of cold well water, and passed the dipper to me. It felt good to have freedom with the dipper, away from Morag's control.

I scratched at a wasp bite on my arm. At least there was only one bite. I had come across the nest by accident while raking up cut hay left on the ground to cure in the sun. I had learned how to keep a sharp eye out for hidden wasp nests. I poured some of the ice-cold water over the welt.

“I heard your mother is having another baby,” he said.

“No she isn’t!” I retorted. I couldn’t believe it. *Another mouth to feed.* We could not manage our family size as it was and now Dad and Morag were having another baby. The well water did not cool down the heat of embarrassment I felt in my face.

When I went home, I asked Jimmy about it.

“Women like to have children,” he said.

He did not see any problem.

Months went by when Dad made the announcement. “I’m taking Ma’am to the hospital. Look after things until I get back.” Dad called Morag “Ma’am” never Mum.

After Dad and Morag left, I asked Annie, “Why did she go to the hospital?”

She replied, “She’s going to have her baby.” Jimmy nodded. They both knew more about the world than me.

When Dad returned that night he took Morag’s place in the kitchen and with Annie’s help, set up our bread. The next morning, two golden coloured loaves were cooling on the kitchen table. He must have used the right temperature; a welcome change from Morag’s blackened ones. I’m not sure where Dad learned how to bake bread but he did it effortlessly with no yelling or cursing. Then Dad cooked porridge for us, standing over it and stirring constantly, choosing not to place the pot into the fire, like Morag did. He knew how to manage a woodstove.

If it was more work to care and clean up after her children, we did not mind. Annie washed their faces and changed diapers. Jimmy and I organized play time. After our meals, Annie made tea and fussed around the kitchen while I took care of cleaning the dishes. Jimmy kept Morag’s little ones amused and Dad sat at the table to read his newspaper. We fell into a routine of domestic bliss.

Dad was easy going and it was fun to be around him. My constant fear and nervousness had ebbed away. As long as Morag

was in hospital it meant I was safe for a couple of weeks until she and our next arrival came home.

*“When days are dark
And friends are few
Remember me and I will you.”*



The Christmas Parcel

“I don’t see how we missed it.”

I could tell from the irritated tone of Annie’s voice that she had grown tired of waiting for the wood framed school van. The snow-covered trail was too hard packed to see fresh tracks so we couldn’t determine if the horse drawn van had passed our farm that morning.

Shifting my lunch container, a used jelly can back into the crook of my arm, I stamped my cold feet up and down on the snow, trying to keep warm. It wasn’t a really cold day, and no wind, but it was mid-December and one gets chilled standing around. Jimmy passed the time throwing handfuls of snow at a fence post. It was just the three of us. Morag’s children were too young to attend school. The morning air was crisp and the sun glistened on the frost that had settled on tree branches.

“Maybe we’re late. Let’s start walking to Wards’ Farm.” Annie said.

Annie, always the surrogate mother, took the lead. We walked on.

“Why didn’t the van come?” I asked.

“I don’t know, Ross,” Annie answered, “but I’m not going back home.”

“Something’s happened. I bet school’s cancelled,” Jimmy said while he spun around in circles.

Annie put her hand on Jimmy’s shoulder to stop him.

“Do you want to go to school or back to her?” She gestured with her thumb over her shoulder. Jimmy hung his head. Silence fell over the three of us. It would not be a pleasant day, staying back with our stepmother, because Dad had already left with the team to cut firewood in the bush. Besides, if we decided to return

to the house, Morag would have sent us back out to wait longer saying it was our fault that the school van had not shown up.

I followed Annie and Jimmy up the lane to Wards' farm.

"No, it's too far for Sara to walk and the van may still turn up," Mr. Ward said. The three of us continued, through the fields with Jimmy opening and closing the gates for us. Even on this day, Jimmy was sure to complete his job of opening the gates, to allow the van to pass through. He had been promised a dollar and a quarter at the end of the school year.

On and on we walked, through the next neighbour's land and then back onto the road allowance, heading north to the main highway and then right, turning east to town. We walked along the school van tracks and did not see anyone else on the way.

Once we arrived at the schoolhouse, we found the door locked and no sign of anyone inside. It was obvious that the custodian had stoked the furnace with coal, as smoke was coming out of the chimney. The only time I ever saw coal was at school. We could not afford to buy coal, not even "bum coal" that was made from shavings. Instead we relied on green saplings for fuel as there was never enough seasoned wood to hold us over each year. Perhaps if we had coal we might all have been warmer and a little happier during the winters.

Even our neighbours, the Meades who were poor like us, could afford coal for their stove. We were the poorest of the poor.

"School's closed. I wonder what's happened," Annie said. Sometimes the school closed down when there was a funeral but that only occurred in the afternoons and it was still morning.

Jimmy walked around the school, jumping up at the windows, trying to get a peek inside but no one was around.

"We might as well go and get the mail seeing we're in town anyway. Dad will be looking for his papers." Annie said. Being a member of the United Grain Growers, Dad received free subscriptions and as he was interested in politics, he enjoyed

reading the weekly newspaper.

I was glad we were going to go inside somewhere warm. The four miles cross country to town had been a long walk. My feet had started to grow cold and felt slippery and damp from wearing rubber boots over my felts. I wish I had a pair of socks like the other kids in school. Maybe my feet would stay warm then.

Crossing the school field, we walked to Main Street and entered a house where the barbershop and post office was located. We passed through the entranceway of a row of locked mailboxes, up to the wicket to ask Mrs. Collins, the postmistress for our mail. We did not have a key for a mailbox, as we couldn't afford to rent one like other families.

Annie, being the tallest reached up to ring the electric bell. I stood in front of Annie and Jimmy, my chin just coming up to the bottom of the wicket. Soon, Mrs. Collins came from a back room. A look of astonishment was on her face as she greeted us.

"What are you doing here?"

"The school's closed," Annie answered.

"I know it's closed. No one's called and told you then?" Mrs. Collins grimaced.

"Our phone's not working right now. Dad has to pay it up."

"Everyone's supposed to stay clear of town. Diane Brighton has the Scarlet Fever. The school's closed down until the nurse says it can reopen. You best get back home right now. Scarlet Fever can spread."

Scarlet Fever. I had heard those dreaded words before. I liked Diane and hoped she wouldn't die. That explained why she had missed school last week and the Christmas concert practice.

"When do you think nurse will let us go back to school?" Annie asked.

"Not likely until after the New Year," Mrs. Collins answered.

No Christmas Concert! I thought about the traditional gifts that the School Board trustees gave out to each student. Maybe

candy, a new scribbler and pencil, would be waiting for me on my desk.

“Can we pick up the mail?” Annie asked.

“Wait here a minute.” Mrs. Collins walked away into the back room and returned, holding a large parcel wrapped in brown paper and heavy twine. It was so big that it barely passed through the wicket opening. I tiptoed to stand a little taller. I was overcome with joy. *This will make our Christmas happy!*

“We best take it back to my Dad,” Annie said.

“Do you think you can manage it? Maybe your Dad should come and pick it up.”

I stayed back. Mrs. Collins’ tone was critical.

Annie did not falter in her confidence. “No, that’s alright Mrs. Collins. We can take it home.” Annie smiled at Jimmy and motioned to him to take one side of the bulging parcel. I took hold of their lunch containers, two peanut butter cans along with my jelly can. The cans were awkward to carry in my small arms, but I did not complain.

Once Annie and Jimmy had settled the parcel down on the floor, I could see it had several stamps of King George VI and it was addressed to Dad in black fancy handwriting. I read the curly lettering that accentuated each capital R in Dad’s name: *Robert Reid*. I felt proud.

Annie said, “It’s from Grandma and Grandpa. From England.”

Dad had told us his parents owned a dry goods general store and sold groceries and clothes. I had never met my grandparents but had seen a photograph of them. I imagined them far, far away in England, both grey haired, stooped over a box on a table, filling it with special goodies to reach their grandchildren in Canada. My granddad had probably been dressed in a white apron, while he held the parcel steady, so my grandmother could wrap it in the brown shop paper. Our grandparents could be counted on to send a parcel each Christmas.

“Ross, go hold the door open!” Annie called to me while she motioned to Jimmy to pick up one side of the parcel by the twine, as she grasped the other. I had to stand sideways so that Annie and Jimmy could get through the doorway, the parcel was that big. The sun was bright and while I looked down on Annie, as she and my brother struggled to get the parcel down the barbershop steps, the ends of her auburn hair glistened, under a toque. I wondered how we were going to manage it all the way home as it had been a very long walk to town.

“This must be the biggest one yet!” said Jimmy, while he and Annie grappled the parcel between the two of them. *A parcel for Christmas!*

The parcel was heavy, so we took turns carrying it and had to set it down several times on the journey home. We were so pleased and excited that we never tired of walking. I had a hard time keeping my end off the ground, as my legs were shorter than Annie’s and Jimmy’s.

Happy day! We did not mind the cold or that our arms felt weighted down. We were so excited and knew that it was going to be a pleasant homecoming. We would not get into trouble from Morag for deciding to walk to school. The anticipation of what was to come kept us warm and we forgot our stretched muscles as we chattered to one another.

“What do you think’s inside?” Jimmy asked while eating our noon meal of scones. We were resting on the horse trail where the school van had previously upset on its side the week before. There was a noticeable depression on the sloped side of the trail. Sometimes the van upset now and again on the trail, because of the deep snowdrifts. The driver would unhitch the horses and we all helped to set the van back up again. It was a good thing the stove was up by the driver so the kids wouldn’t get burned.

I was still hungry after eating my lunch, but the empty feeling I felt disappeared when I thought about what might be

inside the parcel. It was well tied and I picked up an end of the twine, rolling it between my finger and thumb. While I studied the stamps on the Christmas parcel, I let my hands smooth over the brown paper and Jimmy did the same.

“Curiosity killed the cat!” Annie shouted. But when she saw Jimmy’s downcast face she said, “Never mind, Dad will open it soon enough.” She put her arms around him to show she was not angry.

Finally, we reached home, cold and tired, in time to see the sun coming down. We had not seen a single soul all the way to the school nor on our way back home.

We were heady with excitement when we passed the parcel to Dad. He untied the twine, rolling it up into a small ball and refolded the brown paper for future use. He lifted out a container of nuts, several small brown paper bags filled with hard-boiled candies in different colors and a large cookie tin of Grandmother’s homemade shortbread. Next were the toys. A doll for Annie and military replica planes for Jimmy and me. Wooden pull toys and alphabet building blocks for Morag’s children.

I examined my toy airplane, tapping the red dot in the center of concentric rings of blue and white. It was dark green and brown with painted circles on the sides and on each wing tip. The underside was painted light blue.

Dad showed us how to wind up the tin toy planes to make sparks, resembling gun fire that “shot” out of each side. The wheels turned and if I rolled these against the floor, it went a little way by itself.

“Those are Spitfires, boys,” Dad said. “Fighter planes in the British Royal Air Force. Fast because of the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine. Your Uncle Edward in England works for Rolls-Royce.” Dad traced the yellow thin line around one of the blue and white circles. “And that’s the Roundel insignia.”

I sensed the pride in Dad’s voice.

Soon, we were busy re-enacting war stories we had heard from school. We spent the whole evening swooping and diving with our toy planes, making machine gun noises, “Tut-tut-tut...tut-tut-tut.”

Morag told us to put our planes on the kitchen table and blow out the oil lamp before going to bed.

I curled up tight in a ball, in bed next to Jimmy, while I shivered under our single thin blanket.

“Are you still awake?”

Jimmy stirred, rustling the straw in our mattress. “Yes, why?”

“Wasn’t this just the best parcel yet?”

“Yes. Now go to sleep.”

I wished I could take my toy plane with me to school, after the Scarlet Fever of course. I couldn’t wait to be able to show the other boys what had arrived from England. There was a globe of the world at school that had been supplied by the municipality and I traced the outline of England in my mind. I knew my Dad’s homeland was across water far, far away. I started thinking again of being a British fighter pilot in my own Spitfire, maneuvering the controls in the cockpit, flying past the shores of England, to circle over Granddad’s shop. I take a closer look and see a grey haired old man, dressed in a long white apron, and a grey haired woman standing next to him. They are both waving to me from the ground below and a warm feeling wraps around me. I am no longer cold and drift off to sleep.

The next morning I searched the kitchen for my toy plane.

“What are you still doing here?” Morag said as she glared at me. I was supposed to be in the barn milking the cows. I pointed to my grandparents’ empty cardboard box and stuttered, “My pp-pp-plane.”

“Move your arse!” Morag bellowed while she hit me on the back of my head, forcing me out of the house. The door slammed shut behind me, and then opened by Morag who tossed my cap, a pair of mitts and jacket out into the snow bank in front of me,

before slamming the door again.

When my work was done in the barn, I returned to the house to look around for my toy airplane. It was not to be found. *She's done something with it.* Disappointed, I gave up the futile search. To suppress the lump that ached in my throat, I made myself stop thinking about the lost airplane.

I never saw my toy Spitfire again.

“Hard words break no bones.”



The Boogeyman



It was impossible to hide from the boogeyman.

Schooling did not come easy to me. All my time growing up, Morag did not allow any of us to do homework, look at newspapers or bring library books home to read. Nor were we allowed to use the phone (when it was working) to call our friends. It was as though she did not want us to know anything about the outside world. She had chores for us instead. My energy was depleted from

working from sunup to sundown and I had a terrible time concentrating on my school lessons. It may also have had something to do with the boogeyman. I recall Morag's introduction.

"Aye Ross, have you've seen the boogeyman?"

"No," I replied. I did not know anything about the boogeyman. It did not sound good.

She told me how big and dark the creature was, that it might chase me and the horrid things it would do. An alarming smile crossed Morag's face and her lips quivered as she told the tales. "He lives outside and likes to hunt little boys, catch them and take them away!" Morag grinned.

When I worked my evening chores, my vivid imagination conjured up a gruesome monster with long reaching arms, towering over my head. Morag's stories had frightened me. I fumbled to close the gate in the dark. *Hurry! The boogeyman is coming! The boogeyman is coming!*

Some nights when I took the milk cows to pasture in a field further away, I had the additional scare of prairie wolves, howling in the distance. By the time I returned home, I was shaking from the fear Morag had implanted in me, and the back of my neck would be soaked with sweat.

"You're not afraid of wolves are you Ross? Did you see anything else out there?" she asked with a contorted smile.

It seemed that the boogeyman was more likely to appear at night when Dad was visiting the neighbours or away at a meeting. It was impossible to hide from the boogeyman. When she sent me out to milk the cows at eleven o'clock at night, Morag hid in the shadows and jumped out at me yelling, "Boo!" I yelped like a puppy every time. "Ross, did you have a boogeyman scare?" She always succeeded. I was terrified, true enough, but not only of the boogeyman. *No, I'm afraid of you!*

So I wasn't learning much. The hours in the classroom were long and monotonous. I was sure I was stupid.

One day during a tedious math lesson, I decided to give myself an excuse to stretch my legs and find the downstairs school washroom.

The warmth from the schoolroom's coal furnace did not reach the downstairs but it was still nice not to have to go outside in the cold to the toilet. Six-year-old Enid Meade had frozen her fingers last winter trying to return to the classroom. She had been unable to open the heavy door of the old schoolhouse. When her father found out, he raised a ruckus. As school board chairman, Dad agreed that the younger grades should move into the new school that had indoor plumbing. The older grades were moved to the old school with the outdoor biffy.

Indoor plumbing had its advantages. The new school had a self-standing water fountain in the hallway. It was great fun to line up after playing sports and help ourselves to pointy paper cups we pulled from a dispenser, before filling these with water.

One time, instead of returning to my seat, I crept into the cloakroom that ran the width of the school at the back, with openings at both ends. The teacher was writing on the blackboard so she did not see me. "Grade Threes, take out your scribblers," she said. My classmates shuffled their feet against the hardwood floor and desk tops were opened and banged shut. *Grammar Lesson.*

I crawled on my hands and knees looking for a certain lunch box. Compared to the large jam cans most students used, Tom Weatherall owned a regular working man's lunch kit that had silver clips. It was easy to find. My lunch of Morag's dry unappetizing biscuits and tough beef — Dad always butchered the oldest animal — had not filled me. I was still hungry. I was always hungry.

Tom had not eaten his chocolate cake at lunch and I had been thinking about nothing else. My classmates often saved a part of their lunch for afternoon recess. *Saving the best for last.*

I found his kit and the clips opened easily to reveal the most perfect square of chocolate cake with beautiful white icing carefully wrapped in waxed paper. It was a generous piece, two and a half inches square. *Maybe just a taste.* The dark dense texture topped with icing melted in my mouth. *Heaven!* And before I could stop myself I took another couple of hungry bites. The cake was noticeably smaller. I thought if I left half of it that would be a dead give away that someone had touched it. I rationalized if there wasn't any evidence, Tom might think he had eaten it already. I devoured the rest of the cake, closed the lunch kit and returned to my seat.

When afternoon recess was called, we clamored to the cloakroom to retrieve coats and jackets to play football outside. I steered clear of Tom. Out in the yard, I kicked the ball so hard that my felt liner and rubber boot flew off into the air. Everyone looked. Once it landed, I hopped on one foot to retrieve my wayward boot, to the delight of my cheering schoolmates.

I was putting my boot back on when Mabel Brown, or "Scratch" as we called her, approached me. Mabel had earned her nickname after a fight in the school van and although her mother kept Mabel's nails trimmed, the nickname stuck.

"Ross, did you want to be on our team?" she asked.

It felt good to be wanted. It wasn't often that I experienced the feeling of belonging. Like the time great uncle Jeremy Kendal died and the whole community turned out for the funeral. He had been well liked and served on the school board. Classes had been suspended so that we students could attend.

We had filed into the church, making our way down the aisle to the front where the coffin had been set up. Although I stretched to look inside, I was not tall enough.

"Here, I'll help you up." Jeremy's son, Stephen, had whispered in my ear.

Uncle Jeremy looked the same with his white mustache and

white hair. Mottled hands were crossed against his chest and he seemed to be in a deep sleep. He had always been kind to me. That spring when I had delivered a message to his house, I found him standing in the road admiring a flock of ducks swimming in the ditch. It was rare to see the ditches fill up with spring runoff. He had called me over and we both watched with delight.

Stephen, my second cousin, was now the patriarch of the family. The Kendals were respected, well-liked and I was connected to them. As he held me up, the closeness between us was witnessed in front of the whole community and during those few minutes, I had the special feeling that I belonged.

"I am sorry for your loss," I whispered to him and placed my hand on his cheek. I knew it was the right thing to say. He gave me a look that only close family can understand. The moment passed when Morag gestured to me to sit next to her in the church pew.

"Ross, come. We need you on our team." Mabel's words brought me back.

She was referring to a game we played where the younger boys sat up on top of the bigger boys' shoulders. Mabel had selected Henry Kendal for me, and he knelt down so that I could climb up. It was the younger boys' task to pull one another off as the older boys ran haphazardly in the school yard. Henry was tall and he hung on tight to my legs while we worked to win with Mabel cheering us on. Being smaller with arms strengthened by farm chores, I was good at staying on top the longest plus I had a competitive spirit. I even pulled Jimmy down. I did not remember what we called this game but it was great fun.

Then it was down to our team and one other.

Mabel provided some encouraging advice before dashing back to the sideline.

"Are you ready?" Henry asked.

"Yes! Go!" I shouted.

Henry lunged toward the opposing team and I reached out

and pulled the last boy off. The schoolgirls applauded our win.

“Good going, Ross!”

The Kendal boys came up to me and slapped me on the back and I had that special feeling of belonging once more.

Teacher’s hand bell rang out to sound the end of recess and we returned from our fun for the remaining day’s lessons. I settled into my desk when teacher walked over and stood in front of me.

“Ross, did you take Tom’s cake?”

The answer must have been written on my face. If I was wearing a telltale smear of icing, Mabel had failed to notice. Tom must have gone to the teacher and, reported his missing cake. I realized then, that I had hurt Tom, who was younger than me, to bear being a victim of a crime. He had probably looked forward to his recess snack and now it was gone. He must have been terribly disappointed and shocked to know someone could willfully do that to him. I was mortified and miserable all the way home. *I’m a thief!*

I will never know how Morag found out. She met me in the yard and the redness in her face made her look more menacing. Jimmy and Annie had disappeared.

“Son of a bitch,” she said. “Get inside the house and find me a stick.”

Trembling, I took a stick from the wood box and passed it to Morag. After the beating she lifted the ring in the centre of the trap door to the root cellar and ordered me down the three steps into the darkness below. The cellar was not an unfamiliar place as I was often sent to sprout the potatoes in storage but this time I was sent down for punishment and without a lantern.

Rats lived in that root cellar. I often saw their eyes gleam in the lantern light, as they watched over me, sprouting potatoes. I thought they knew what I was thinking. But this time I did not have a lantern and I sat on the top step in the dark to avoid the rats. I knew stealing Tom’s cake was wrong. My hands were still sore from teacher’s strap, yet I was not given a way to make it up

to him. That would have been more meaningful but like everything else, Morag chose to do things her way.

Hours went by when finally, Morag let me out and I bolted out of the house to hide until Dad returned home from working in the fields. Boogeyman justice had been served.

“I want it back.” The words were gritted out between clamped teeth and stated with dark foreboding. Morag was referring to Dad’s tractor and threshing machine that was still at Willie Starling’s farm.

Dad kept quiet.

“It should be here. Not over there,” she said. Morag did not trust anyone and was clearly infuriated with Willie. Each harvest, if the tractor and threshing machine was still over at Willie’s she ordered the equipment home. She could not stand anyone having Dad’s property.

Willie helped run and maintain Dad’s equipment. Dad never ran the tractor or the threshing machine during the harvest. Willie did. Maintenance had to be done in preparation for next year’s harvest and it was more convenient to store the machinery at Starling’s farm, but Morag had to have it her way. If not, she would tantrum with loud profanity until Dad humored her out of it. He did not always succeed. Many times he gave in and the equipment was returned. Dad knew Morag was capable of trudging over to Willie’s place. She was sure to open with the statement, “This is not a social call.” Dad wanted to keep the peace. None of this made any sense to me when Willie operated Dad’s equipment and took care of the maintenance. If Willie was annoyed, he never showed it. I am sure he wanted to keep the peace with Morag too. I guessed adults could be scared of the boogeyman also.

Dad was generous with his machinery and welcomed other neighbours to use his chopper. We never had enough grain left

over to grind up into chop for our animals. The neighbours and Starlings did, so they came over from time to time to run the tractor and use the chopper. Chop was great for pigs, and horses and cows loved chop too. We had raised a pig or two but never as many as the Starlings.

Grinding grain into chop was such dusty work. So dusty that thick clouds of fine white powder covered Willie, his son Bryan and wife Jane, while they shoveled the chop into their wagon. It took a morning's work to fill a wagonload of chop but that load would feed Willie's pigs for a number of weeks.

I liked watching our machinery at work. Pulleys and belts on the chopper were powered by the gasoline engine on the tractor. The chopper was bolted down on the granary's wooden floor, flooring that had been quilted together with nailed down pieces of used tin cans to cover the rat eaten holes.

The tractor was rarely used. All of Dad's machinery was worn out and the tractor was what Dad called, "temperamental." It was difficult to start up the engine when it was cold. Willie made small fires under it or poured hot water on the engine to get it started. The tractor was only used to operate the threshing machine and chopper.

Despite Morag's concern about Dad's equipment, she liked the Starlings well enough and when she was in a good mood, encouraged Willie to visit. After all, he did keep the tractor in good running order.

Willie had come over and Morag made tea. We kids had been sent to bed. Now that Dad no longer employed a hired man, Jimmy and I had been moved into the vacant hired man's bedroom near the kitchen. There was only one bed and I shared it with Jimmy.

Being near the kitchen meant I could hear the conversation. They were talking about the price of crops and Willie's voice was high with optimism. Morag was a big part of the discussion. She was interested in farming and preferred the outdoors to housework.

“What do you think wheat will sell for next year?” Dad asked.

“It can’t get any lower than what was paid last year, thirty-eight cents a bushel,” Willie said.

I heard Dad clear his throat. “I took a wagon load of thrashed grain in today.”

I cannot remember if Dad had filled the wagon with wheat or rye. It was rare to grow barley.

“I exchanged for six bags of flour,” he said. Each bag weighed one hundred pounds. “No cash this time.”

“Hope the flour lasts us until next fall,” Morag said.

“Remember when the price was a dollar-sixty?” Willie said.

“You’d think prices would go up not down,” Morag said. “There’s less crop around.”

“I know!” Willie added. “Thrash all day to get a little pile of grain! A day’s work used to fill a granary. Easy.”

Morag sniffed. “The drought finished those days.”

“Good thing I let the hired men go. Nothing for them to do.” Dad said. “I’d have to give them a make-work project!”

Willie laughed.

These days Dad only hired men during threshing season. I must have been five or six years-old when the hired men left. I recall the time when Dad directed his men to shovel grain from one bin into another. I figured Dad must have needed the front bin emptied until I overheard him tell Morag that he gave the men “a work project” to prevent them from asking to go to town. When there was no work in the fields, hired men liked to go to the beer parlor in town but came back “legless” and did not work well the next day. I guess Dad did not like that much. These days with fewer crops to reap and money being scarce, there was no need for hired men.

While I listened, I was dismayed to feel the urge to use the backhouse. Earlier, while trying to fill my empty stomach, I had raided the garden and eaten several overripe tomatoes. I thought

about the chamber pot Morag's children used in their room. Maybe Annie used it too but Jimmy and I were not allowed one. We had to use the backhouse before going to bed and we were not allowed to leave our room again until morning. The only way to the backhouse was through the kitchen.

By this time, my shyness had grown to such a level that I was exceedingly anxious around adults. I decided I had to hold on until Willie left. Besides, Morag might think I was trying to eavesdrop instead of sleeping. Plus I was afraid of the dark and there was the boogeyman to consider.

My stomach churned.

"More tea Willie?" Dad asked.

"Sure."

I groaned. I was becoming desperate for the backhouse.

More time passed while the grownups enjoyed their tea. I could not hold it any longer and the air in the bedroom turned foul. If Jimmy knew anything, he did not let on. I prayed Morag would not find out.

"It's been a long day. I best get going," Willie finally said.

Goodbyes were exchanged and the back kitchen door opened and shut.

Dad shuffled down the hallway to their bedroom and I heard the rustling of newspapers. He enjoyed reading in bed but that meant he was out of earshot to what went on in the house.

Morag suddenly appeared in our bedroom doorway.

I bolted upright.

"It's ... it's ... an accident," I managed to stammer. It occurred to me that if she knew, then Willie knew. I had embarrassed her. *I should have gone out!*

Morag grabbed my arm and marched me outside.

"Take your shirt off!" Her voice was filled with contempt. I removed my soiled nightshirt. She grabbed it and rubbed the

soiled parts into my face, then dropped it at my feet.

“Clean yourself up,” the boogeyman said through bared teeth.

I never felt more scared and ashamed.

*“As through this book your eyes do wander
Let not this page unnoticed be
But stop one moment here and ponder
And cast one kindly thought on me.”*



Lightening Strike!



Archives of Manitoba
Agriculture — Harvesting — 1937. Threshing (67)

Annie was crying. I trembled for her, knowing that if Morag saw tears or heard weeping, there would be more trouble. Annie was scraping the blackened bottom of the porridge pot with an old metal spoon, worn down on the edge from use, to free up the last bits of burnt porridge. She wiped away her tears. I stood next to her, helpless, holding my drying towel, waiting for her to finish. Once the pot was dried it had to be handed over to Morag for inspection. Morag's own housekeeping skills were not of a high

standard, yet if Annie had not totally cleaned the pot, Morag sent it back.

It was often difficult to clean the dishes. The water was cold and fat from soiled dishes built up on the sides of the dishpan. Morag did not allow soap because the dishwater was used as slop for the pig. Morag inspected each dish. If she found any stuck on food particles, she slammed the dish back into the pan, with no regard for the greasy water that splashed up into Annie's face.

Annie worked and worked at the pot. Finally, she passed it over to me. *Finished!* I felt a small lump of stuck-on porridge that Annie had missed. I peered inside the pot. *Maybe I can remove the lump.*

I felt the air rush past me from the wet towel when Morag hit Annie.

Morag cursed and cursed. The ill treatment toward Annie was becoming routine and I felt sad for my sister, but relieved to be spared our stepmother's harsh slaps. I heard the sound of another slap from Morag's hand hit the side of my sister's head. I had been spared again. Slaps and harsh words from Morag were fading Annie's smiles and carefree ways. My Annie was disappearing.

The next day, Morag's mood improved slightly when dark clouds, illuminated by intermittent flashes of lightning, rolled across the sky. During the storm, I hid underneath the wagon in fear of being hit by the lightning and watched as the clouds, filled with the empty promise of heavy rain, moved on.

The accompanying winds carried away our dry topsoil and any remaining nutrients needed for starved out crops. After the winds died down, layers of dust were everywhere, including the top of fence posts.

"No rain again," Dad said. He stroked and patted the team of horses as Jimmy hitched the wagon. Earlier, Dad had changed his mind about hitching up the team to work in the fields because of the chance of rain. He had been positive we were going to have a good

soaking. Wet fields could not be worked and swirling clouds with lightening spooked the horses. We deserved a break and now that was lost. With no rain, I knew it meant watering the garden, a task Dad had agreed we postpone when the dark clouds had been spotted.

“Sorry boys. The garden needs watering. See how much you can do before supper.”

Dad’s words meant Jimmy and I needed to carry our pails under the hot sun to the slough, a quarter-mile away. Numerous trips, hauling water back and forth until our arms felt they were stretched past our knees were required. It was a long walk and watering the garden took forever. To pass the time, I looked for wild flowers that grew along the path. I could count on seeing yellow buttercups and red lilies with dusty stamens that turned my fingers bright red. They were my favourite.

Holding a pail in each hand, I trudged behind Jimmy as we made our first trip to the slough. I tried to hear the frogs that sang from their hiding places in the cool of the ravine. *Nothing*. The summer had been too hot and dry. I almost backed into Jimmy when he stopped dead in his tracks and dropped his empty pails to the ground. He stepped off the path.

“Look!” Jimmy pointed to a cow that had fallen down in the grass. Her head was at an unnatural angle and I saw one eye staring off into the distance.

“What happened?” I asked.

“She’s not breathing. I’m going to get Dad,” Jimmy said.

“Is it distemper? Maybe the sleeping sickness like Belle had?” I added.

“I don’t know, Ross. I’d best get Dad. Stay here.” Jimmy sprinted for home.

Every cow was important to us. *Maybe Dad can give her some medicine.*

I kept my distance from the cow, wary in case she decided to wake up and jump to her feet. I knelt down in the grass beside her.

A cloud of flying gnats had formed above her head and horseflies landed on her back. I waved them away while trying to shield her visible eye from the sun. I thought it was odd that she was not panting or foaming at the mouth, like Belle had. Jimmy and Dad appeared with the team pulling the wagon. I thought Dad might say something about me not starting the watering, but he only crept down on his hands and knees to examine the cow.

“She’s been hit by lightening. See those black marks on her back?”

Dad bent over the cow, running his hand up and down her back, before lifting a leg and carefully setting it back down. He removed his hat and rubbed his forehead. He looked tired.

“It must have happened during the lightning storm.” I heard the gloom in Dad’s voice. He looked weary. “Come boys, help me pull her around.” The team stood quiet as we went about our work. Dad fastened her back legs to the wagon.

Dad was too preoccupied about the cow to think about sending us back to our watering.

“Get up,” Dad called out to the team. We all returned to the barns, dragging the cow behind.

Morag walked over. “You won’t be able to butcher it.” Morag was always blunt with her words. I felt sad for Dad as he worked hard looking after our family and here was a whole cow that would not be going to market.

Our farm was often in a delicate balance and Mother Nature had tipped the scales again. Cows and calves had succumbed over the past winter from the lack of feed. The remaining cows had stopped producing milk in the spring and the surviving livestock were still weak and thin as they grazed on poor pasture grass. And now we had lost another cow.

That night, after Annie had washed up, I carried the dishwater out to the pig. I saw high in the sky, several crows circling the wisps of grey smoke from a manure pile. Dad had

taken care of the cow. I stood for a while until it was time to turn back to the house to await the storm that was brewing there.

*“When in a distant land
This little verse you see
Think of the gentle hand
That penned these lines for thee.”*



“Clean Your Plate”

Another winter passed and with the arrival of spring, along came Morag's expectation that I do more chores. I had chores before and after school, in addition to my work on weekends. The chores Dad gave me were pleasant enough and I liked contributing my share. I knew young boys had to help out on their farms. The Great Depression was on and Dad could not afford to pay wages for hired men. Working under Morag, was just that, work but I did not mind some jobs, like feeding the hens.

The hungry hens scrambled over top of one another undeterred by my shaking out the remaining screenings of oats and the clanging sounds of the handle hitting the side of the pail. Screenings were valuable as we had next to nothing for feed. After threshing season, our meager grain was checked at the grain elevator in town. The good grain was shipped by rail and we were entitled to take the sieved screenings of weed and oat seeds home.

Without screenings, hens scratched the bare ground to hunt for food and sometimes this caused problems. Like the time a hen picked up a piece of broken window glass that became wedged crossways in its beak. The frantic hen had run around the yard with her beak unnaturally wide open. The glass looked like a jewel when the light glinted off it. I let Morag know, who promptly pulled the glass out from the beak. We could not afford to lose even one hen.

Hens ate almost anything, including jackrabbit.

Jimmy and I learned from the boys on the school van how to snare rabbits. We used stovepipe wire and set our snares off the bottom fence lines along rabbit paths. It was easy to find rabbits, as there was little bush on the farm and they traveled across land. In winter time, they left their tracks in the snow and

used the same path. A rabbit's head was sure to find its way inside our snares. Trapped, the rabbit jerked the snare closed and choked itself dead. Rabbits never had a chance with us. We were young boys, and I am mortified to say that hunting rabbits at the time was a great adventure.

Also, there was praise for helping to put food on the table. It meant the hens had a feed too when there was extra. Morag would open the rabbit's belly with a knife and pull the hide off, revealing a gruesome spectacle before hanging up the carcass for the hens. The exposed remains seemed to increase the hens' appetites. They strutted back and forth, pecking at the carcass constantly until it was clean to the bones. It was a sight to watch but not as disturbing as seeing hens peck the weaker ones to death. That was terrible.

We ate a lot of boiled rabbit yet if food was scarce for us, it was more so for the livestock. Occasionally my hunger was fed by friends. I fondly recollect a former school chum, Richard King, inviting me home for lunch.

"Ross, my dad says I can invite you. When can you come?"

I was happy for the invitation and Dad wrote a permission note to my teacher. To lunch in town was a new experience for me.

Unless it was snowing, Richard went home for lunch where he lived with his father in an old house. I had heard his mother had a nervous breakdown and was recovering in a mental asylum in the city. Richard and his Dad were poor and on Relief. Even so, Richard had a new pair of runners and it wasn't even the beginning of the school year. He called his runners "Sim-Sans" probably because they were from Simpson's mail order. His runners had bright white laces and looked comfortable compared to my felt boots.

It was a short walk to his house. I followed his example and hung my outer jacket on a coat peg in their verandah. I already knew his clothes were clean and without rips or tears like mine. Standing in his house next to him made me that more aware. His

hair was shiny too. I had learned to stand away from people as I smelled and was often “lousy.” Sometimes when I scratched the back of my neck, I could feel tiny eggs embedded in my hair and when Morag discovered the lice crawling on me, she took care of things with a coal oil treatment.

When we walked through Richard’s door, his dad had an apron tied around his waist. “You must be Ross! It’s nice to meet you!” Mr. King reached out to shake my hand. The table was set with three plates. He served a tasty lunch of sliced bread drizzled with generous spoonfuls of hot gravy. The meal was enjoyable and while walking back to school, I wished I could have the same experience at home.

Like the night before, when Morag had placed a dish of hardboiled eggs in the middle of the kitchen table. She generally broke eggs into our mashed potatoes. But this night, Morag had prepared hardboiled eggs, one for each of us, to go along with our supper.

I stared at the dish, longing for my hardboiled egg.

“If you can’t ask for it, you can’t have it,” Morag said. If she knew you wanted something, she wouldn’t offer it. She also knew I could not form the words to ask. My stuttering had become more frequent. So instead of stammering out, “Can I plsse ... plesse ... please have an egg?” I looked down at my plate.

Jimmy and Annie kept quiet and Morag’s young ones with mashed potatoes smeared on their mouths stared at their mother. Everyone else had been rewarded with an egg after asking for one. Two eggs remained on the plate; one for my father who was still out in the fields and one for me.

“Ross, what did I tell you?” she said.

I looked up but did not dare ask. I would only stutter. I told myself to stop looking at the last two eggs. *I’ve got to stop this or she’ll just give me more hell.* I finished my mashed potatoes and put my fork down to rest my hand on the table.

Wearing a smirk on her face, Morag reached out and struck my fingers with the blade of her table knife — a reminder to keep my hands in my lap. “Get your hand off the table!”

Annie, Jimmy and her children were excused from the table. I had to stay until I asked for my egg. I tried to say the words and while trying, I seemed to lose my breath.

“Go on with you!” Morag said as she gestured me away from the table.

I never did get that egg.

September’s arrival meant the end of another blistering summer. Jimmy and I were in the garden shucking corn. There was an abundance of corn this year, and although I was getting sick of eating it day after day, I was hungry just the same. It had been a long time since lunch and my stomach was empty. The corn would go along with the hen Morag had killed for our supper.

I looked down at my plate. *Gizzard again.* Jimmy had the neck. Annie had fared better this time with a thin slice of breast meat. The drumsticks went to Morag and Dad. One of Morag’s children chewed on a wing and I saw the remaining one sitting on a plate. I would have preferred it.

“Eat your grub,” Morag said. Her tone matched the scowl on her face.

Although I hated it, I had to eat my gizzard to avoid a slap later from Morag. She wouldn’t slap me now, because Dad was at the table but if I did not eat my gizzard and when I was away from Dad’s protection I would pay later. I had not minded the boiled jackrabbit we had last night even with the nasty tasting dumplings she had made to stretch the wild meat.

If there wasn’t any bread or biscuits to go with our meals, Morag made pancakes or dumplings. Bread took longer to make and pancakes and dumplings were quick. The dumplings from last night’s dinner had been made with the tainted flour from the

pantry. The flour bag had been set up against the coal lamp oil barrel. Somehow, the oil had seeped into the flour. Every time I ate one of Morag's biscuits or pancakes, it left a horrible taste in my mouth. The flour bag was still half full and we could not afford to throw it out.

"Get in here you little bugger!"

I ran at her command. I had not heard her call me in for supper the first time. She gave me a whack across the head as I found my way to the table.

I went to my usual seat, beside Jimmy and Annie, across from Morag's three children. Dad was still in the barn. She dished up our supper of mashed potatoes. I knew they would be dry again as there were no eggs to moisten the mashed potatoes. We were out of eggs as cold weather affected the hens. It meant another winter of dry mashed potatoes until the hens started laying eggs again in the spring.

I was hungry and dug into my supper when Morag slapped me across my ear. "Slow down," she said. Then I received another smack. I had placed too little on my fork. If I did the opposite of what she asked me to do, I think she thought I was taunting her. I had to hold my fork a certain way and even then, if I put too much on it or too little, Morag would say I was being obstinate. I kept my head bowed over my dinner plate. Jimmy and Annie sat quietly too. I had heard Morag shouting and cursing at Dad earlier in the day and I tried to figure out what had happened to make her so angry. I trembled inside not knowing what to expect next.

Morag turned her attention to Annie. "Clean your plate, bitch." These days, Morag was referring to Annie this way. Annie started to sob and I could feel a lump rise in my throat that when mixed with the dry potatoes, made me gag and I started to hack. I longed for a cup of water as every dry mouthful stuck in my throat but she did not allow this. And there was no milk to go with

tonight’s dinner. We had finished the milk. I was glad for that, as the last batch had been ruined when our hungry cows had found a patch of French weed. The sourness could be smelled on their breath when they walked by. Drinking the objectionable tasting milk did not hurt us, but it tasted sour and Morag had expected us to knock it back, as nothing was thrown away.

Dad came to the table. He did not seem aware that I needed a drink. He concentrated on his plate that Morag had dished for him. I suppose he wanted to keep the peace. When he defended us, it only started another row. Mealtimes were hard enough as it was.

Morag treated us differently from her own children. It seemed she had drawn a line; her children were on one side and Annie, Jimmy and I were on the far other side of that line. I do not understand why Dad did not stick up for us more but maybe he did not want to interfere with Morag’s parenting.

I could not express the agony I endured. The daily beatings were terrible but meal times were getting worse. Every time we gathered around the kitchen table there seemed to be a row. When they weren’t arguing, Dad and Morag ate in silence. Skimpy servings of food and our growing family must have been stressful on them too. These experiences at our kitchen table were troubled and stressful ones, unlike the lunch hour I spent with Richard and Mr. King, which had been worry free and where I had had no problem cleaning my plate.

*“When rocks and hills divide us and you no more I see,
Just take your pen and paper and write a line to me.”*



Grandmother



Archives of Manitoba
Agriculture — Farms c. 1925. Farmyard (65)

“Ross, go and cut some grain for the team,” Dad called to me.

Dad and Jimmy had returned from the fields for the noonday meal. Jimmy worked alongside Dad on the weekends now. It took all of us working long hours to keep our small farm going. Nevertheless it was important to rest the workhorses during the day. Dad was good with his animals.

I picked up the scythe from the barn and made my way down to the edge of the field as the oats in the old potato patch had run out. The quarter-acre patch had served as good mulch and the grain we had seeded by hand had flourished. But that had steadily disappeared. Horses that are worked hard, need to be fed well.

With the blade of my long handled scythe, I managed to cut

the oat straw close to the ground and gathered as much as my arms could carry back to the horse manger. The hungry team trotted up for their midday meal, and pawed the ground, making short snorts of appreciation while I patted them. They loved being caressed. Then they dropped to the ground to roll in the dry dirt. When they returned to their feet, they shook, just like a dog, starting from their heads right to the end of their tails. It was delightful to watch. The workhorses had the next hour or so off while we ate our lunch and did a few chores.

We went inside for our noon day meal.

Annie served lunch under Morag's supervision. Dad helped himself to a cup of tea from the pot on the woodstove and sat in his leather chair. Morag had made biscuits to go with our soup. She had substituted baking soda because she had run out of baking powder again. The biscuits tasted acrid from the rusty-coloured bits of baking soda. That meant she had not taken the time to mix the ingredients together or bothered to sift the mouse droppings out of the flour.

"I'm thinking of seeding the back fields this fall with winter rye," Dad said. "Jimmy, you want some training on the seed cleaning machine?" Jimmy looked pleased. Once the fields of wheat, oat and barley were harvested, farmers liked to seed winter rye because it grew and ripened earlier and they could work on getting that crop off first.

"Jimmy, hitch up the wagon. Annie, Ross, hurry up with those dishes," Dad said. "I'm taking you to see your cousins. Your grandmother's in from the city."

Morag was standing at the stove pouring hot water into the teapot. She banged the kettle down on the stovetop. She was not pleased that Dad had stopped work for the day. She left the room and without saying a word or grumbling, returned with Dad's suit jacket.

I stood between Dad and Annie in the wagon box directly behind the horses, my hands gripped over the edge, and watched their rhythmic bobbing heads. Jimmy kept leaning over the side to

look at the wheels roll under the wagon.

“Don’t fall out the wagon Jimmy!” Dad warned, as the horses picked up speed going down the hill. I was surprised to hear the lightness in Dad’s tone of voice. He never said that much to us, and if he did, it was usually to holler, to keep us out of trouble. I cannot blame him as life was tough.

I was happy to stand next to Dad and it reminded me of the time he placed me on the horse when I was little. He never hugged me. It wasn’t a thing fathers did. I never felt fearful around Dad, he was kind and gentle and even though I often saw worry deepen the lines in his face, he never took his despair and frustrations out on us.

Dad was close to his Kendal cousins but other than Irene, they had stopped coming to visit. Morag must have protested against our relatives as Dad arranged our visits elsewhere. She may have been jealous as the Kendals were successful farmers, educated and well dressed.

Our maternal grandmother lived far away in a big city and we saw her whenever she came to visit the Kendals. She stayed with Irene and arrangements were made for Jimmy, Annie and I to see her. The visits were infrequent and I am sorry now that I did not appreciate my grandmother back then. It must have been hard on her to lose a daughter and know that we were motherless. I was shy and uncomfortable around adults and dodged her hugs and squirmed out of her arms, so I could go play with my cousins. She was only trying to be a grandmother to us during those visits. It is a shame that I never connected or kept in touch with her.

*“These few lines to you are tendered from your brother
sincere and true
Hoping but to be remembered when I am far away from you.”*



The Dugout

During the 1920s, Uncle John, my mother's brother, worked for Dad as a hired man. After mother died in '29, Uncle John moved to the coast and found work in a copper mine. Every year during his holidays, he traveled by train to visit his relatives on the prairies. On these occasions, Dad turned up at our school and walked us over to Mr. and Mrs. Elliott's house to meet Uncle John. Mr. Elliott ran the United Grain Growers elevator, which stood next to the railroad tracks and I assume that's where the train dropped Uncle John off. Those visits with Uncle John helped me recognize the importance of family. I had a special connection with him as well as my Kendal cousins, and I kept in touch with him throughout the years until his own passing.

The Elliotts served us tea and when it was available, rationed sugar. Jimmy reached his arm out when Mrs. Elliott passed a cookie tin filled with store bought biscuits. He did not want to be missed. Annie was holding her cup with two hands and her face was beaming. Mr. and Mrs. Elliott were pleasant and they must have had their own share of worries as their only son lived in a mental asylum.

Sitting at the kitchen table, we listened while Mr. and Mrs. Elliott updated Uncle John on the community news. The conversation soon turned to farming and the high cost of freight rates.

"If you think rates are high for wheat grain, wait till you hear the cattle rate. Many folks don't even bother now," Mr. Elliott said.

"Why's that?" Uncle John asked.

“Cattle cheques come back less than what it cost to freight their cows out. People can’t afford to keep losing money,” Mr. Elliott said.

The adults pondered the bitter facts.

“Well, I best get back to work. It was good seeing you again John,” Mr. Elliott said. Dad and Uncle John rose up and shook hands with Mr. Elliott.

Mrs. Elliott said, “Robert, John, don’t rush. I’ve plenty of time. Sit and have more tea. The children want to stay.” Dad and Uncle John sat back down. We watched as Mrs. Elliott lined up our teacups to pour small amounts of tea into each. She repeated the process so that no one received weak tea.

“I almost forgot to tell you my news,” said Dad. “I put my name in with the municipality for a dugout. We’re always short of water.”

Uncle John seemed surprised. “How much will that cost?”

“The municipality shares the cost. I’ll pay twenty dollars and they pay the other half.”

I wondered how Dad had saved the money. It sounded like a lot of cash.

Uncle set down his teacup and said, “Why bother? That ravine is always out of water except in springtime.” He sounded skeptical.

Dad looked thoughtful and he rested his arm over the back of his chair and re-crossed his knees. His chair creaked.

“The ravine’s not that deep. A dugout would be at least fifteen maybe twenty feet deep. Surely we’d hit an underground spring and have water all the time then.” Dad gave me a nod.

Uncle John raised his cup. “You might be onto something there. Saves on hauling buckets from the well.” He winked at me.

“Yes.” Dad’s voice was optimistic. He poured some tea out of his cup into the saucer and slurped the hot liquid in loud fast gulps. Dad had unusual habits. I think he preferred to drink his tea

this way, likely on account of not having any teeth. All his teeth had either dropped out or had been pulled out by the dentist and he did not wear dentures.

“Who else is getting one?” Uncle John asked.

“I saw them make one at Franklin’s farm. The municipality uses the Caterpillar bulldozer they use to build roads. They make a dugout sixty feet long and about twenty feet across. It’s a good idea.” I heard the excitement in Dad’s tone as he gestured with his arms, the largeness of the dugout.

“Ross, does that sound good to you?” Uncle John looked at me. I straightened up in my chair, pleased to be noticed and nodded my head. Uncle grinned. He was always including us, encouraging conversation during our visits, although I could not always predict what his response to me might be. Like the time I asked what chilblains were. I had heard a relative complain about chilblains and when I asked him what they were, Uncle John had retorted, “When your feet get too cold!” He must have been surprised at my lack of knowledge. I had felt stupid that I did not know about chilblains.

I couldn’t wait for the bulldozer to come and make us a dugout.

Weeks passed and the big day arrived. The bulldozer had made its way to our place. The ground shook from the enormous weight and the tracks made a distinctive clicking sound. It was exciting to see such a big machine in our yard and watch the tread tracks flop over and over when the bulldozer came to a slow stop. Dad motioned to the driver to follow him to the back where wooden stakes had been pounded into the ground. The driver revved the machine and the exhaust system pumped out large black clouds of smoke. Jimmy and I trailed behind the earthmover. When they had reached the spot, Dad spoke with the driver again before walking back to us.

“Stand back, boys. Don’t get too close.”

We watched the bulldozer blade cut into the earth. The movements were jerky and every time the operator revved the machine, more black smoke blew out of the stack. The machine made its way back and forth digging out the earth. This went on for hours when without warning, the bulldozer grinded to a screeching stop. *Oh no! Breakdown!* Dad and the operator looked all around the machine to find the problem and Jimmy was sent on foot to fetch a neighbor. After some time, the neighbour figured it out. A bolt had broken and had worked its way down deep inside the machinery. The operator tried to pull this out, and couldn't. I worried that maybe we wouldn't get a dugout.

"Let me try," Dad said. The operator moved out of the way. Dad had long and slender fingers. He reached inside.

I held my breath.

"I think I have it. There it is. Yes, I do." He withdrew his hand and held up the broken piece. *Dad saved the day!*

Pride engulfed me when the men talked about how Dad managed to get the bolt out. It meant the operator could take the broken bolt and return with a replacement.

A few days passed before a new bolt was installed and work on the dugout resumed. With each passing hour, my anxiety that there might be another breakdown subsided.

When the dugout was done, the driver climbed out of the bulldozer to have a final conversation with Dad. Jimmy and I walked to the dugout to see the water in the bottom. Dad had been right; an underground spring was found. *We struck gold!* The bulldozer had succeeded in making a crater so large that our entire house could have fit inside. We ran up and down the steep smooth sides while Dad and the driver watched. I thought Dad might make us stop but he seemed to enjoy seeing us having some fun. Unlike Morag who was apt to say, "It's all fun until someone pokes an eye out."

That comment could stop me dead in my tracks.

During the digging, Dad had asked the machine operator to pile up earth to dam the ravine. Dad's directions were followed and earth was packed down to make a short road, or causeway. It made it easier for the horses hitched to farm implements to cross over to the back fields instead of driving through the steep ravine.

With the completion of the dugout, a couple of the neighbour boys came over on their bicycles to check it out. I was astonished to see Dad jump on one of the bikes. One of the boys took the other one and the two of them rode all around the place, laughing. Dad rode the bicycle as if he had always ridden one. It was funny to watch yet sad to see because we did not have bikes and I never expected to be able to learn how to ride one, let alone ever own one. *At least we have a dugout.*

We were the talk of the school as everyone knew the Caterpillar bulldozer had been at our place. I was the centre of attention and in my excitement I started to throw erasers. Several students, including Jimmy joined in. Our antics grew when the teacher stepped out of the room. It was a thrill to throw them through the air and then dive under my desk to avoid being struck by a returning missile.

The teacher caught us in the act and we were each given the strap. As soon as we arrived home, I was getting ready to tell Morag that the teacher had strapped Jimmy. It seemed lately that each time one of us received the strap at school that we had to rush home and tell on each other to save our own neck. There were no worries about being beaten if I told her first. I felt bad yet compelled to tell on Jimmy although we had already been punished by the teacher. I cannot understand why my stepmother felt she had to punish us again. I loved my brother. I felt terrible telling on him.

This time Jimmy beat me to it. Morag sent her children, Jimmy and Annie out of the house. There were no witnesses that way. Beatings were kept secret. She told me to fetch a stick from

the wood box. I passed one to her.

The end of the lit cigarette she held in between her teeth glowed bright red and the smoke curled around her face. As she pummeled my body, the poundings muffled my anguished cries.

*“In sailing down the tide of life
And thinking of the past
Remember that you have a friend
That will forever last.”*



Bucksawing Wood

“Ross, what are you waiting for? Get going.”

Morag had sent me outside every night this past week. It did not matter to her that the temperature was a bitter forty degrees below. I dared not protest or try to seek out Dad, who was in bed. Annie did not say a word and kept at the dishes. Morag had control over all of us.

I did not look forward to joining Jimmy outside to bucksaw wood. The days were growing shorter and the cold air turned our fingers numb. The moon was full this particular night and tree branch shadows made black jagged lines against the snow covered ground, looking like barbed steel wire. It was not an inviting sight.

The frozen wood was green and hard to cut through. Dad had made us a sawhorse so we could saw the wood into stove length. The job took both Jimmy and me to do; one to hold the end by either sitting on it or placing a foot over it, while the other worked the saw. We used a Swedish blade that Dad sharpened with a hand file. The narrow blade worked better than the wide bucksaw blade yet it was hard to hold in the cold and often would bind when it became dull. Even with the Swedish blade, sawing green wood was a tough job.

I held one end of wood down tight while Jimmy worked the saw back and forth. It had been a long day and it seemed that much longer when she sent us out to work in the dark cold night.

“Do you think Dad knows she sent us out?”

“No,” Jimmy answered. “He’s in bed smoking his pipe. He’s knackered down again.” When Dad was fatigued, he went to bed and I think he stayed there so that he could avoid a row with Morag.

Dad would get so crippled with back pain that Morag had to dress him some times. She tried different remedies and had decided that Dad should smoke a pipe. She believed tobacco eased pain. I cannot understand why she had him use a pipe, which is hard to hold between the lips when cigarettes were easier. Dad held the pipe with his hand on account of not having any teeth. He frequently removed the pipe stem and cleaned it with a special wire. It did make him look distinguished despite his stained clothing.

Smoking must have been important to Morag, who was sure to have a can of tobacco and rolling papers on hand. She allowed Jimmy to smoke rolled cigarettes too. He was coming into his own and his smoking privilege put her in high esteem. And when I saw her rolling smokes for herself, I knew she had Jimmy start smoking so she could too. She was cunning.

Yet she never offered me a cigarette. The closest I came to smoking was joining my chums behind the school. Someone brought a pipe and we smoked dried out burrs we had picked from the bushes. It made me sick.

Dad usually smoked in the house after a meeting or in bed. He never lit his pipe outside as he was afraid of starting fires. I liked to watch Dad take a bit of tobacco from the can and pack this down inside the bowl of the pipe. There was the odd time he smoked Morag’s rolled cigarettes and when Willie Starling came over to use our equipment, Dad accepted a tailor-made cigarette.

I took my turn at the saw. It was grueling work but essential to keep our house warm and the cook stove going.

Morag came outside to check our progress. When she saw the meager pile of cut wood, I knew we were not going back inside anytime soon. We had to produce.

To keep warm, we banged our feet against the snow-packed

ground and briskly clapped mitt-clad hands behind our back and front, counting “One, two, three,” and so on. When we reached twenty five, it was back to work but we were soon freezing again. The blade was set down and we started the process of banging feet and clapping hands over again, counting, “One, two, three...”

The night wore on. Usually Morag sent one of her children to tell us to come back into the house. I worried that she had forgotten about us. Out of desperation, we took turns going to the horse barn to get warm. An agreement was struck to say the other was using the barn for the washroom if she came out to check on us.

Opening the barn door released all the steam from the horses and it was a welcoming place. Once my hands had warmed again, it was my turn to cover for Jimmy so he could have an opportunity to get warm.

There were a number of visits to the barn that night.

Time passed and the temperature dropped some more. Tired of shivering we decided to leave the frigid outdoors and return to the house. *Morag's children will be asleep in bed by now.*

Instead we found Morag and her children at the kitchen table. Annie must have been sent to bed yet it was not as late as we thought. The tea in Morag's cup was steaming and each of her children held a used baking powder can, which Dad had fashioned into drinking cups with his tin snips. A stack of sliced bread lay on the table and Morag's hand, poised with a butter knife, was suspended over the opened tin of peanut butter. We had caught her in the act. While we had been freezing out in the cold, working, Morag had been enjoying a snack. I could tell from Morag's expression that Jimmy and I were not going to be invited to the table.

She passed the slice of bread she was holding across the table to one of her children and proceeded to prepare another.

“You're not done yet. Get back to work.”

I followed Jimmy back outside and we took turns sawing

wood and clapping our hands back and forth to keep warm until one of her children called us back to the house. I was desperate to go straight to bed to warm up but that would not happen yet and the hunger I felt for a slice of bread with peanut butter matched the hunger to be included with her children.

*“When you think of me
Please bear in mind
A truer friend
You scarce will find.”*



Broken Harnesses



Manitoba Archives
Agriculture — Insect Control — 1937.
Grasshopper damage north of Saskatoon (4)

Annie was in the house, minding Morag's children and the new baby. I stood back from where Morag and Jimmy were working at the bench set up outside of the barn. Morag often made me stay close by or follow her around in case she needed me to fetch something.

Morag planned on taking Jimmy and me to pick up dead wood from the government land. Dead wood was seasoned and burnt well so this was an important job, but harness had to be fixed first. The leathers had rotted from age and were worn out. Harnesses were forever breaking and we were too poor to afford to buy new ones.

Jimmy held the pieces of broken harness down onto the closed vise. After making a new hole with the awl, Morag prepared to tap a washer onto the rivet. If the washer did not go on exactly right, the rivet became burred from the end of the hammer. She held it with her fingers and lifted the hammer and brought it down. At that precise moment, Jimmy stepped away from the bench.

“Goddamn it!”

Morag put her finger in her mouth. It must have been painful. “Get back here!” She commanded him to return to the bench and hold the harness pieces together again.

“Son of a bitch!” she swore loud when she hit her finger a second time.

Morag raised the hammer to strike the rivet a third time, when I heard Jimmy make a slight sound. Then I heard it again, a snicker. *Don't! Don't!* Jimmy always had the giggles and often smirked but this was not the time. I stood rooted to the ground and prayed. *Please God!*

In an instance, Morag turned and hit Jimmy on the side of his head with the hammer. *No!* I could not believe my eyes. He grabbed his head and winced. Although he did not cry out, it had to hurt. Morag grabbed his arm and angrily motioned to him to get back to the bench, and the harness mending continued on as if nothing had happened. I stood back behind them both, not knowing what else to do, wishing I could reach out to Jimmy and ask him if he was all right.

Later that evening, Jimmy said, “My head aches something awful.”

I could see a red mark on the side of his face.

“That’s the last time she tries anything on me.”

I saw a look of determination on Jimmy’s face and asked him, “What do you mean?”

“Never mind.”

There was no point in imploring that he tell Dad. Arguments between Dad and Morag were increasing and I had the sense the rows were always about Annie, Jimmy and me. Telling would only instigate another clash between them. We were unhappy enough.

The next morning, as Morag spooned out our oatmeal, I saw that her face was red and swollen. Her face did bloat and puff out from time to time and I do not know why this happened but when it did, I had a day off from beatings. Either she could not see through swollen eyelids or she was too centered on her own miseries. Today something was different. One eye was completely shut.

Jimmy had a smug look on his face while he rested his elbows on the kitchen table. Morag was oblivious to his defiant manner and did not yell, “Elbows off!” Without saying a word, Morag returned to her children’s bedroom, where three beds had been set up to accommodate our growing family. She slammed the door.

Later, I asked Jimmy, “What happened to her face?”

“I guess she got some of her own back.” He grinned.

Although I did not see what had happened, I did not believe Jimmy hit her. No one hit her. That was not the way it went. Morag hit us and she also hit Dad. In later years, Dad told me, “She wants me to hit her.” And as far as I know, he never did. He was a gentleman and tried to keep the peace and appease Morag. He let things slide. Problems just were not discussed in those days and I guess Dad hoped things would improve. Morag had made it clear that she was in charge of my growing up.

Jimmy looked me right in the eye and gave me another grin. With all the hard farm work his body had started to shape into a young man's. He was able to stand up to her. I was not.

Morag kept out of sight for the entire day. I did not have to follow her in the house that day to hear her say, "Ross, come over here. I'm going to give you a damn good thrashing."

Jimmy had arranged a day off and I was on top of the world.

*"Some may wish you happiness,
Other wish you wealth
I wish you the best of all
Contentment and health."*



Happy Times

When Dad felt Jimmy was able to manage the team with a wagon independently, he was given the job of moving the manure piles out into the fields. It was great practice for Jimmy as the work was repetitive and straightforward. Since the hired men had left, years and years of manure piles lay dormant in and around the barns.

I went with Jimmy to help load and unload with the team. The manure had rotted into pure fertilizer and we hauled it to the fields and spread it out with our shovels. The trips were endless.

After unloading the wagon we returned to the barns for the next pickup. It was great fun when Jimmy tapped the horses on their flank with the reins to make them run faster down the short dip in the ravine. It meant being out of sight of Morag, and the thrill of the ride reached a happy spot in my stomach. It was probably not great for the horses, but it was an excellent ride just the same.

When we had moved the last manure pile, I was sorry. The job had given Jimmy and me quality time together and it was one of the few times that I felt truly happy.

*“When the golden sun is setting,
And your heart from care is free.
When of others you are thinking,
Will you sometimes think of me.”*



A Surprising Turn

Holding my cards, I looked up to the front of the school van where the girls sat to be closer to the heater. Annie's auburn curls bobbed up and down. She was talking earnestly with our cousin, Edna Kendal. They were both four grades higher than me. As long as I could remember the girls had been close school chums.

"Ross! You played your trump!" Henry shouted.

I looked down at my cards and I couldn't dispute it, and joined in with my cousin's laughter. We were playing a game of Hearts while we jostled against one another on our way home.

At times, the van driver would complain about being too hot from the warmth of the heater while those of us, sitting in the back, froze. The van's exterior was covered in galvanized tin and framed with wood. There was no insulation. Stove wood was kept inside our bench seats and every so often we stopped the card game to pass a stick to the front of the van for the heater. If our faces were hot, our feet were freezing and we banged them on the floor to keep warm.

Jimmy and I sat in the back with the Kendal boys in designated seating, upon two benches that ran the length of the sides of the van. It was just us boys enjoying a game of cards. Knees touching, we hung on tight to our hand of cards, as the van, pulled by a team of horses, swayed down the trail. The feedbag stored under the bench shifted back and forth. A board that served as a table made it easier to deal out the cards.

Our cousins often shared their after-school snack on the way home in the van. As we played cards, we munched on sandwiches made with several slices of tender roast beef or chicken. The Kendals always had something to eat on the ride home. I knew they also had a late supper after helping to look after their cows.

Some school days Dad had to bring our lunch of biscuits when Morag was late with the baking. Her biscuits were as tough as hockey pucks and lunch was usually disappointing. Our lives were very different.

Neighbours in the district had all taken a turn at driving the school van. You had to own land in the School District to apply for the tender. Dad never bid for the van job nor do I recall him ever driving a car or truck. I guess he had never learned. When Bryan Starling had the contract, he used his Model T Ford instead of the school van. The car made a ticking sound and Bryan pushed on the windshield, making out he was helping to get the car up a hill. It was great fun and we cheered when the car reached the top. Bryan always drove us in his car right up until the first snow.

This year, Edna's father had the contract to drive the school van.

"Whoaaa," he said and the team came to a standstill. We had arrived at our farm. Jimmy and I surrendered our cards to Henry for safekeeping. Jimmy opened the sliding door and hopped off the van.

"Giddy up!"

The school van pulled away with Annie still inside.

What? I stared in disbelief as Edna's father drove the van away from us. Bewildered, Jimmy and I looked at each other. Nothing had been said about Annie staying on. Being the oldest, we always followed Annie's lead and trailed behind her up to the house. We did not know what was up and felt lost. We stood at the gate not knowing what to do next. My feet were getting cold and I could feel the familiar heavy weight on my shoulders. We needed to come up with an answer.

Morag had been in a foul mood that morning when I saw her hit Annie in the chest. Annie was maturing and growing into womanhood. She had winced and covered her chest with her hands to protect herself from Morag's whacks. It had been distressing to witness as I stood by helplessly, holding the dish towel.

I followed Jimmy, dragging my steps behind him, up to the house. As the second oldest, Jimmy had the responsibility to tell. I felt fortunate to be the bystander. I had no idea what Jimmy planned to tell Morag.

Halfway to the house, Jimmy stopped. "Dad's not home. He's gone to get wood."

I looked to see that the wagon was missing, and kicked a rock off into the dried weeds that were rooted along the driveway. Dad always seemed to be somewhere else these days. I missed him and if there ever was a time we needed him home, we needed him now.

"What're you gonna say?" I asked.

"I'll tell her the truth. Annie stayed on the van," Jimmy said.

When we stepped inside the kitchen, Morag was pulling a tin sheet of baking biscuits out of the oven. She looked past us.

"Where's the bitch?"

I looked down at the floor where Morag's youngest baby was sitting up on a torn blanket, pulling at a piece of the linoleum. The floor was worn through in places and tacks had been pounded down to keep the remaining pieces of linoleum intact. It was difficult to keep clean. Our house sat directly on the ground and the door never fit right and I hoped that the mice would find the flour bag instead of bothering Morag's baby.

"Where is she?" Morag asked.

"She didn't get off the van," Jimmy said.

"What!" she said with surprise in her voice. A feeling of trepidation and excitement bubbled inside me as I watched the look of astonishment cross her face.

"She went on," Jimmy answered. Morag, who was still holding the hot tray with her potholders, turned around to look at Jimmy.

"What!" she said again.

I prayed Jimmy wouldn't say the wrong thing or smirk. I saw Jimmy's lips curl into a thin smile and heard the edge of

defiance in his voice.

“Annie went home with Edna. That’s all I know.”

I hadn’t thought of that and wondered how Jimmy knew. *Edna?*

That’s when all hell broke loose.

Morag slammed the baking sheet onto the oilcloth covered table. Some of the biscuits fell and dropped to the floor. I intervened and snatched hot biscuits from the reach of the baby. The biscuits were blackened on the bottom. Morag had used green wood in the stove again.

Morag banged plates and threw cutlery onto the table.

“Annie must think she’s better than the rest of us! Good riddance then! She can go live with those goddamn Kendals!”

The baby reacted to Morag’s loud shouting and started to cry. Morag picked her up and bounced her infant wildly up and down on her knee, cursing in rhythm. Morag was acting as if the whole world had collapsed. She had lost leverage and control over Annie. *Good.*

When Dad returned home that evening, it was obvious he did not know why Annie had chosen not to get off the school van. Dad ate his food carefully, taking long sips of his tea as Morag made disgruntled noises in her throat. He prepared to find Annie and bring her home.

“I don’t know why you are so dead set against my cousins. They never did any harm to you.” Dad looked brokenhearted. Morag made another disgruntled noise.

“I best get over there and find out what’s going on.” Dad finished his tea and pushed himself away from the table.

“Tell her the dishes are waiting!” Morag yelled out after Dad had shut the door behind him.

Later that night, Dad returned by himself.

“Annie’s going to stay with Stephen and Thora for time being.”

I heard Morag sniff. “Annie’s cut from the same cloth as those Kendals then!” I did not think it was so terrible that Annie had chosen our cousins over us. She turned her attention to me. “Ross, since you’re not working in the fields like Jimmy, you’ll wash the dishes from now on.”

Dad stayed silent and looked sad.

In an instant my status had changed and I was in the dish pan that very night. It struck me that Annie was gone for good. *She won’t return, ever.* Where there had been three of us, now there were two; one less for Morag to bash and one less mouth to feed. I finished the dishes under Morag’s watchful eye and cringed when she rejected my work. I had not been trained to wash dishes and with Annie’s leaving, my lack of skills added extra abuse until I reached Morag’s standard.

In a strange way Annie’s leaving was a plus. She was a reminder of our mother and by staying on the school van, she was never to fuel Morag’s wrath again. Annie had not been allowed to learn new tasks such as baking and sewing in preparation for her own home one day.

Young girls need to feel safe in their homes and it was a relief to know Annie was free from Morag’s tyranny, yet I missed her dreadfully. It felt like a curtain blind had been permanently pulled down, and the piece of closeness I had with Annie was severed the day she chose to stay on the van.

Annie did not return. I didn’t know if Annie had planned to leave or how she came to make her decision that day. It had taken courage to leave. For Morag, I became Annie’s replacement. Still, I was glad for Annie who had liberated herself. She was the lucky one and I did not blame her for leaving.

Annie!

My heart skipped a beat to see Annie in her usual place beside Edna on the school van. It had been a couple of weeks

since I had seen her last. I guess Thora had decided to keep her home from school for a break.

"Hello, Ross! Time for class. See you and Jimmy at lunchtime," she said when we arrived at school. I never found out if she had confided to Edna on what was going on at home. She never said anything about that last day. Maybe Annie told, but I do not think she did.

Annie shared her sandwiches of sliced roast beef, spread with a generous amount of butter on homemade bread from Thora's kitchen. Her sandwiches were a welcome addition to Morag's plain biscuits. We had a lot to catch up on even though we had been apart only for a few weeks.

"I'm learning how to knit," she said. "I'm making a scarf for Dad. For Christmas. Maybe I'll make you one too, Jimmy. And one for Ross." She leaned over to give my arm a pat. "I could never forget my little brother!" This was the high spirited Annie I had been missing. I imagined Annie sitting beside Thora with multi-coloured balls of wool and knitting needles.

"This meat is good," Jimmy said.

"Stephen picked up a roast from the Beef Ring and Thora cooked it," Annie said.

"A Beef Ring?" Jimmy asked. "What's that?"

"Every week a cow gets butchered and the families come by to pick up their portion. You have to have a membership," Annie said.

"Is Dad a member?"

"No, Dad doesn't belong. Families have to be a member to be in the Beef Ring. Thora saved the drippings. She's going to teach me how to make gravy tonight. Gravy goes good with mashed potatoes."

I licked my lips thinking of fresh meat every week. *Gravy, like Mr. King's*. We never had gravy at home. Our meat turned out tough and too dry to make gravy. Perhaps our farm did not belong to the Beef Ring because Dad insisted on slaughtering the poorest

cow. When it was time to slaughter, he chose the oldest cow in the herd and butted it on the forehead with the back of an axe. The animal dropped instantly to the ground in a heap. It was quite humane. Or maybe they were ready to die as our cows were in such poor shape.

I was happy to be near Annie again, to hear her laughter and to see the carefree change in her. It had only taken a few weeks of being away from the misery in our house, and life had already improved for Annie. *Good.*

*“Think of me when you are happy
Keep for me one little spot
In the depth of thine affection
Plant a sweet forget me not.”*



Stooking with Dad

“It helps keep the seeds from falling out of the heads.”

Dad was explaining what stooking meant to Morag’s younger ones while we finished our porridge.

I had gone before, to stack wheat and oat sheaves into stooks.

“And if it should rain before thrashing, it helps to keep the grain dry,” he added.

There it was again, the hope for rain.

Once my housework was done and the cows had been milked, I was in the fields to help bring in the crop. Our ripened grain fields were ready to be cut with Dad’s binder machine. Crops were tied with binder twine and turned into sheaves and dropped into windrows onto the ground. As Dad made his way around the field on the binder, we were there to help stack six or eight dropped sheaves into stooks to dry in the sun. Sheaves had to be stacked in case it rained. Legends tell of rain dance rituals, but we went stooking and prayed for rain instead.

I walked with Jimmy, and followed Dad and the team of four horses. Dad pushed a lever with his foot that caused the carrier on the binder to drop the sheaves. Two drops equaled enough sheaves to make a stook. We picked up the fallen sheaves and bundled these into the familiar tripod style groupings. Often we stopped to tie up a sheaf that the knotter on the binder had missed, or to pick up any remnants of binder twine left on the stubble. Bits and pieces of binder twine could catch in machinery or wrap around a horse’s foot.

I stopped to watch the bull wheel turn the reels. The binder hummed like a hundred treadle sewing machines. A large needle threaded with binder twine, looped around the grain to make a

sheaf. Every so often the twine twisted up inside the binder box and Dad hollered, “Whoa!” He then opened the binder box and after a minute or so, he was ready to start up and the team commenced work again.

Where the crop was thin on higher ground, the moisture ran off and the binder moved along without producing any sheaves. During dry years, low-lying areas yielded better crops. There was a lot to consider while out in the fields.

After windstorms, Jimmy and I were sent to check and restack any stooks. Sheaves had to be picked up by hand and, reshaped as stooks, to stand in the fields for weeks before the threshing gang arrived. If stooks were not stacked properly, the grain in the end of the sheaves started to sprout. It was tiring work, as we did our inspection, stopping to pick up and rearrange the windblown sheaves. It meant walking miles and miles between long rows of stooks across open fields without straw hats to protect us from the sun but, as boys working for our father, we did not mind.

*“Keep your face always toward the sunshine and
shadows will fall behind you.”*

Walt Whitman



A Scary Night

“It was an accident, I’m sure,” Dad said in my defense. Morag had told Dad I hurt her child on purpose. Dad countered her spirited words. Earlier in the day, while sweeping the floor, I had bumped into one of the toddlers. When the child landed on her bottom and started crying, I had helped to steady her back onto her feet. It had been an accident and I had tried to comfort her with some soothing words.

Arguments were frequent at the kitchen table. Morag cursed and attacked Dad, and he protected himself by holding up open palms to ward off her punches. Whenever he stood up for me, it seemed to increase her anger and, although I felt safer when Dad was at the table, Morag knew how to get even with me later. I had changed positions with Annie and I grew to fear Morag’s impending whacks, which were frequent and severe as she let the frustration out of her system.

Dad chose not to back down and they argued back and forth. Morag shook her fist at Dad and banged the table hard. She delved into her mashed potatoes but her profanity squirted her food out in all directions. She was at the boiling point.

Then she went quiet. Suddenly she jumped out of her chair and threw her fork like a spear across the kitchen table.

“Ow!” Dad yelled. He pushed his chair away from the table. Morag’s fork was embedded in his neck. I was numb with fear yet amazed at her skill as she sat the farthest away from Dad.

He withdrew the fork and blood oozed from the wound.

“Call Central, Jimmy! Ask for the nurse!”

We were never allowed to use the phone, but Jimmy jumped up and cranked the handle to signal for the operator. It was as if he made phone calls all the time, the way he had responded to Dad’s request. Jimmy held the phone up to his ear and cranked the handle again.

Morag was scared of authorities and without a word, she gathered up her children to retreat to the back bedroom. I was petrified. It was going to be a difficult night.

“There’s no answer,” Jimmy said, holding the phone out toward Dad. It meant that the phone was dead again as Dad was behind paying the bill or it needed a new battery. That night the call never went through. I was worried and scared, not knowing what would happen to us. I thought it was the end of the world. I think Dad had Jimmy make the call to give her a scare and I was glad it had not been me. I worried about repercussions.

That was the first night Morag abandoned Dad and slept with her children. Jimmy and I slept with Dad. After that incident, it did not take much for them to get into a row and it always ended with Morag saying, “Take your two bastards and get to bed.” That was her name for us. She was free with her curse words and did not seem to care if we or her children heard. And that’s how we ended up sleeping with Dad.

“I guess it’s time for us to turn in,” Dad said.

Jimmy jumped into the bed first, against the wall, and I slept in the middle as Dad liked sleeping on the outside. He was handy to his nightstand that way. Their double bed was comfortable with a regular mattress and sheets, unlike our straw mattress and no sheets. I stayed as straight as possible so that I did not touch Dad. He was in pain most of the time and complained about his bad back and sore bunions. He couldn’t walk in shoes. He wore loose rubber boots most of the time. In the house he wore slippers with the heels pushed down. How he must have suffered. So I kept in the middle of the bed as I did not wish to add to his misery.

Dad liked to read newspapers in bed, preferring the political sections first. He enjoyed politics. He read his books too. He wore reading glasses and dressed in a long nightgown that reached his ankles. He would miss Morag’s mustard plaster tonight. She often mixed mustard, flour and hot water into a piece of flannel and

applied this to his chest. It eased his coughing. He always seemed to be unwell and I think he was susceptible to colds. Other times Dad tied a piece of flannel around his neck and he said it helped his sore throat. The tobacco Morag had insisted he smoke did not seem to help, but she liked to doctor including dissolving a teaspoon or so of Epsom salts into Dad's tea.

I dreaded Morag's doctoring. When I had bad earaches, Morag heated a liquid in a spoon over the lamp oil flame and commanded me to hold my head to one side while she poured the hot liquid down inside my ear. In the spring she gave me Castor oil and at other times when I was constipated. There was no way out of it and she enjoyed giving me my medicine. Despite her ministering, I often had large carbuncle boils on my wrists and arms and sties in one eye or the other.

Dad had to make his own tea this night. He was a firm believer in the remedy of tea. He loved it and drank cupfuls, even if it had boiled on the woodstove all day.

During these turbulent times, we were safe when we stayed with Dad. Several nights would go by until Morag told us, "Go to your own bed tonight." That's when Dad and Morag were back together again.

When we were sent back to our own bed, I felt like an outsider. It was hard on me, being bounced back and forth. It happened often and I never knew what to expect next.

*"Friendship is a golden tie
That binds our hearts together
And if you never break that tie
We will be friends forever."*



A Few Hours of Freedom

“We need groceries,” Morag said. *She’s planning a trip to town.*

Dad and Morag lingered over their tea while I washed up the breakfast dishes at the kitchen table.

Dad looked thoughtful and nodded in my direction.

“Ross, finish here and go hitch the team,” he said.

I looked forward to hitching Nelly and Mae to the wagon. It meant Morag would be on her way soon and gone for several hours. I helped her children get into the wagon box. I had not been invited.

I gave the team some reassuring words and patted Nelly on her side and her daughter Mae on the white mark on her nuzzle. They were in for a tough time ahead as Morag was a poor and impatient horse driver.

Morag came out of the house and I was surprised to see her wearing a dress. She usually wore bib overalls. I averted my gaze. The heat of the summer must be getting to her or she was planning to visit someone. *She might be gone all day. Even better.*

Morag took the reins and looked down at me. “Get to work in the garden.”

She snapped the reins and Nelly and Mae started off, their ears bent backwards. I sensed the tenseness in their muscles as they trotted out of the yard.

Instead of heading to the vegetable patch, I hid behind the row of lilac bushes and watched the wagon make its way onto the road and turn towards town. Jimmy was helping Dad out in the fields. Since the announcement of her plan that morning, a giddy feeling had been growing inside me and my head felt like it was ready to burst.

I never had opportunities of freedom as she did not allow me in the house alone. It was rare for her to leave me on my own and I intended to make the most of it. It was wrong to browse the cupboards, but I planned to take advantage of my freedom,

knowing if she found out, it would mean the death warrant for me.

I took another small bite of the sour rhubarb stalk I had pulled from behind the lilacs and chewed the stringy matter into a small cud, before swallowing it whole.

My mouth watered in anticipation of helping myself to some sugar. *She'll be gone for hours.* During breakfast, I had seen the full sugar bowl. We depended on ration stamps but as she never baked cakes or cookies, we seemed to always have an ample supply of sugar.

I made my way to the kitchen and opened the cupboard door. Using both hands, I took the sugar bowl out, set it down on the kitchen table and removed the lid. I looked out the window to check the road, in case she had forgotten something and had turned back. *No wagon. Safe.*

I licked the end of my sour rhubarb stalk before inserting it into the bowl. The sweet gritty particles melted in my mouth. The enjoyment was disturbed by thoughts of Morag returning home and I checked out the window again. *You'll get a damn good thrashing.* I pushed her words out of mind and the threat disappeared when hunger for the sugar overcame my fear. I finished and removed the indentations made from the rhubarb stalk by shaking the bowl slightly and returned it to the cupboard. I checked the counter for any telltale loose sugar grains.

My attention turned to the new can of peanut butter Dad had brought home from a recent trip back from the grain elevator. It had already been opened by Morag who cut the peanut butter with some sugar. That was the only way Dad could eat it, on account of it sticking to his gums.

I helped myself to a finger-full and smoothed the area where I had made a dent and returned the can back into place.

I continued my browsing.

Pushed far back on the top shelf, I found a tall dusty jar of toothbrushes. It was covered with spider webs and there were

mouse droppings in the bottom. I was surprised. I had never seen the jar of toothbrushes before. One toothbrush, bigger than the others, had an orange handle. *That one must belong to Dad.* I counted four smaller ones in different degrees of use. It seemed to me that the toothbrushes must have been from my mother's time because we did not brush our teeth. Morag could not have known about these toothbrushes, otherwise she would have thrown them out. Except for the piano, anything connected to my mother had been removed from the house.

I knew from my schoolteacher that people were supposed to clean their teeth. I decided I wanted to have a clean mouth and selected one of the smaller toothbrushes to sterilize. I stoked up the cook stove with wood and put water in a pot to boil, while I looked for the salt. When the water was bubbling, I dropped the toothbrush into the pot and it immediately twisted up like a pretzel.

Oh no!

My mind reeled. The container was now short one brush.

Why did you do that Ross?

I could not afford to have Morag find out and, I went to work and cleaned up my mess in the kitchen. I buried the damaged toothbrush as deep as I could into the ground between the cottonwood trees. Once that task was behind me, I returned to my job weeding in the garden and worked at making up missed time.

Later during supper with all of us crowded around the kitchen table, Morag looked straight at me and said, "Who's been in the sugar?"

That was the end of peeking in the cupboards.

*"Most noble and generous, benevolent and free
My heart beats with love and affection for thee."*



Joe

During those years, it did not seem that I could do anything right by Morag, including playing with her children. Like the time Jimmy and I had made a bobsled from a wooden apple box we nailed on top of some old boards. We made a harness for the dog, and after giving him a few treats, we had trained him to pull Morag's children around the yard. It was great fun and we were soon all laughing. That was the only ride they enjoyed as Morag later smashed the makeshift bobsled into bits. I genuinely liked her children and had started to become close to them but held back my feelings when Morag was around. As soon as she saw us playing with her children, she sent her kids into the house and Jimmy and me outside to do chores.

When Dad and Morag needed to discuss something, Jimmy and I were sent outside with her children. It was natural to play together. But that never lasted long because Morag complained we were too loud. If someone became hurt, Jimmy or I took the blame. There were fun times though when we carried her children out through the deep snow to the school van. They wore runners as Dad could not afford overshoes. I did enjoy spending time with her children.

“The boxing match is on tonight. I recharged the wet cell.”

One night after dinner, Dad had carried in his large battery, or wet cell, that he reserved for the radio. It was a rechargeable six-volt battery and heavy, the same type used in cars. It required frequent recharging and he did this by hooking it up to a wire connected to a small windmill on top of the granary. It took hours and hours to charge up. When the battery was ready, Dad brought it inside and fastened it to his crystal set, situated near a window in the front room. Then he went outside to pour water over two

steel rods, hammered down into the ground near the window. Watering the steel rods helped to increase the current and improved the reception. Radio wire was wrapped around these rods and connected to an aerial on top of the house. The apparatus looked fragile enough but it did work.

While listening with large earphones, Dad played with the dials on the radio. We lived near the United States border and American stations came in loud and clear.

“Ross, Jimmy, listen to the Max Schmeling and Joe Louis fight!”

We moved closer to the crystal set.

Dad transferred the earphones over my head.

Above the din of the roaring crowd the announcer shouted, “Louis moves in! Left jab, again and again!” A loud bell clanged. Dad removed the earphones and as he placed them over Jimmy’s ears I heard, “Round three!”

Jimmy listened wide eyed and grinned broadly.

Dad worked the earphones back and forth, sharing the excitement with us.

After the match was over, Jimmy found two pairs of Dad’s big winter mitts and we put on our own boxing match. Jimmy played Max Schmeling and I assumed the role of Joe Louis. That’s how my nickname, Joe came about and it stuck. I took a swing and “Max” returned it. Our mitts connected with a muffled smacking sound.

“Ma’am! Come see Max and Joe fight!” Dad looked with pride as we sparred, encouraging us in our improvised boxing match. Morag looked on with disdain. She did not agree with us playing when we could be using our energy working, bucksawing wood for the stove or mucking out the barns.

By now, Jimmy was laughing too hard and under Dad’s protective eye, I was quick to work him over. I took advantage of his giddiness and won the match just like Joe Louis, as we had

heard on the radio. We rolled on the floor giggling and punching the air with the winter mitts.

Dad called out, “We have a winner! Joe Louis!”

Morag came back into the room. “Do we now? We have a winner then? Joe’s your name you say!”

That's when she started calling me Joe. She said it in a taunting tone. I think she did it because she did not want to use my real name. Dad never called me Joe but if he had, I would not have minded. Jimmy never called me Joe and I think he chose not to, knowing how Morag said it to me.

But for now I was enjoying sharing radio time with Dad and Jimmy.

“Boys, settle down. Amos and Andy are on,” Dad said. He passed the earphones back and forth and we listened to the opening organ music and a Campbell’s Soup advertisement. After the comedy show was over, I thought that the radio must come from outer space.

*“When you go east
And I go west
Remember me
And forget the rest.”*



Blizzard

The blizzard was still in full force and this marked day three of blowing winds. It had been a tough hard winter with a lot of snow and we missed quite a few schooldays when roads were impassable. It was difficult to get to the barn as the snow had packed hard and blown into drifts that reached to the barn roof.

“Stay in the house.” Morag had dressed herself to join Dad and Jimmy in the barn. She checked the stove before she left. Despite Morag’s tone, I felt quite lucky. I did not mind having to look after her children in the house instead of bracing myself against the winds. I think she was worried about one of her children leaving the house and getting lost in the blinding snow.

Morag returned to the house and placed more green logs into the woodstove. She had not stoked the stove prior to going to the barn in fear of starting a fire in the chimney while she was out.

“Joe, you can get on the shoveling.”

I dressed into my thin jacket and faced the bitter cold. Everything was blown in and it was difficult to get to the barn where Dad and Jimmy were feeding rusted oat straw to our emaciated horses. We never had enough good feed.

I shoveled around the barn doors and walked back and forth to make a path between the house and the barn. I took advantage of the enormous snowdrifts and climbed up to have a look over the landscape, changed now by the blizzard.

A week went by before we learned the school had reopened.

On account of the recent blizzard, David Meade, who had the van driving contract this year, had to cut through Ward’s

property to avoid the deep drifts in the road. Mr. Ward had two gates that fenced his livestock on his property. Arrangements were made to hire Jimmy to open and close the gates to allow the van and team of horses through the fields. It was the only way to be able to pick up Mr. Ward's daughter, Sara. David used the new route until the roads became passable again.

When Jimmy had earned enough money, he purchased a hockey stick and puck. By now we were doing all the outside chores, including cleaning the barns, and once this was done we rewarded ourselves with a game of hockey.

Jimmy assumed the role of goalie and removed the sweat pads from a horse collar and tied these to his knees and legs with binder twine. I took novice swings with the stick and tried to score goals. Because of the dirt floor, I placed the puck on a piece of board. It probably looked more like golfing at first, but it was great fun in the warmth of the barn with the smell of bedding straw and the horses standing contentedly in their stalls. We only had the one stick, and took turns. We practised raising the puck with the stick and in no time we had mastered that and the puck flew across the barn floor.

"Score!" I yelled when the puck whizzed over Jimmy's shoulder into the imaginary net. I was winning. When Dad found out what we were doing, he put a quick stop to the makeshift hockey game. "Boys, no more." Dad did not have to say why. He could not afford a doctor's bill should one of us become hurt.

Jimmy loved hockey. He was eager to open and close the gates for Mr. Ward and saved his earnings. Once he had made more money, he bought a pair of skates and practised at the town hockey rink during school noon hours.

This went on until the day Jimmy lost his balance. Another skater, who had been following too closely behind, fell also and Jimmy's forehead was sliced open.

When news of the accident made it to the school

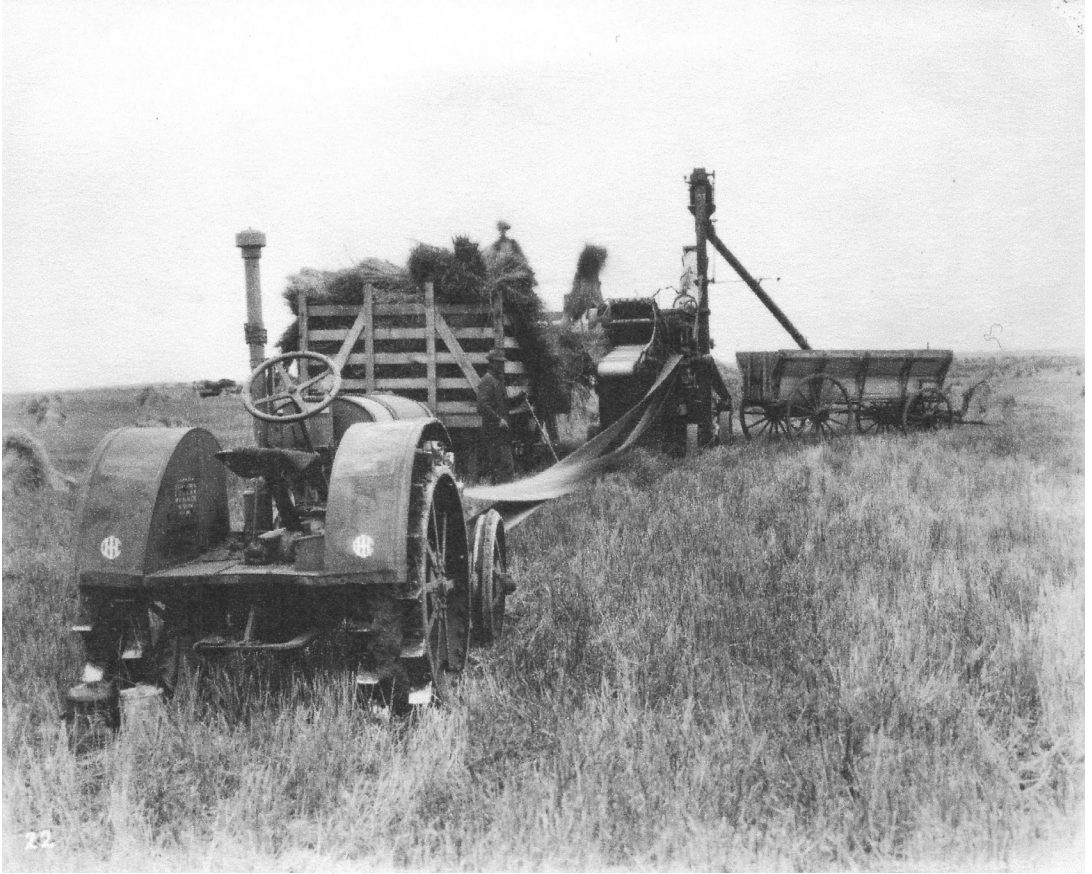
playground, several of us rushed to the rink to have a look. We weren't disappointed. It was a deep cut and blood gushed from the wound until the teacher bandaged it. Someone in the community was summoned to drive Jimmy by car to the hospital. By the end of the school day, Jimmy returned in time to go home on the van. It had taken many stitches and his forehead was taped up for several days after that.

Although the blizzard gave Jimmy an opportunity to earn some extra money, he was not allowed to keep his purchases and that was the end of his hockey career.

*“Forget me not,
Forget me never,
Till yonder sun shall set forever.”*



Submission



Manitoba Archives
Agriculture — Farms — 1944 Harvesting (20)

“Let the wind blow the stink off you,” Morag said.

She never wanted me to play with her older children and no doubt when I forgot myself and instigated playtime, her children

and I became noisy in the sheer enjoyment of each other. I was twelve years-old and Jimmy was at work with Dad in the fields. Morag thought I should be working too instead of playing, so she had me take the older children and throw stones off the garden into the ravine. It was a never ending job as our land was rocky.

Seeing Morag's scowl, I quickly herded the restless children outdoors. Morag picked up the pail of scraps and the rest of her kids followed her to feed the hens penned in the yard.

It was a June morning with no breeze and the sunshine felt warm on my face. The ground was cool on my bare feet as I walked down the trodden path toward the garden, matching the children's small steps.

They were familiar with this task and soon we were all at work squatting in the garden picking up prune-sized stones and throwing them into the ravine. The work became monotonous and I made it into a game, encouraging the children to see who could throw the farthest. Soon we were all laughing. After a time, we separated. I misjudged how far Morag's boy was, and I hit him hard on the head with a rock. He started to cry. A lump of fear hit deep in the pit of my stomach. It had been an accident and I had not meant to hit him.

"Mama!" He left to look for his mother, holding his head.

I continued to throw stones.

Morag called out, "Joe, get in the house." The lump of fear dropped further.

I was in for a licking. The tone of her voice rang in my ears. As I walked up to the house, my heart raced. She must have thought I had hit her boy with the stone on purpose or maybe this is what she wanted to believe; an excuse to beat me.

Once inside, she grabbed my arm and yanked me over to the stove, near the wood box where she rooted around for a special stick.

"Let me see. What stick do you want? This one, Joe? No, this one's too small. How about that one? It's a little bigger...but

not big enough for my special bugger. How about this one? There's a nice one for my Joe!" She raised the stick over her head to bring it down, striking my back again and again.

I screamed and broke free from her grasp to scoot under the kitchen table. I felt like a cornered and trapped animal, hiding for safety. She was too stocky to get underneath but short enough to get down on her hands and knees. She was determined to finish me. She tried to yank me out from under the table. I changed tactics and hung onto the table legs and begged her to stop. The table slid and chairs fell backwards when she dragged me out. My forearms burned against the linoleum.

"It was an accident! I didn't mean to hit him!" There was no way to avoid the punishment.

Morag growled a string of foul accusations and smacked the stick against the floor. She planned to teach me a lesson. I was not allowed accidents. I was desperate and pleaded. It was no use.

She grabbed my arm and flung me against the table. I screamed in pain. She restrained me by straddling my trembling body between her legs. I was in agony and begged for mercy.

With the palm of her hand, she covered my nose and mouth to smother my screams and clubbed me with the stick. I struggled to breathe against her big hand. I was afraid of dying. The wide-eyed look of Bryan's clobbered gophers came to my mind and something told me my screaming was urging her on.

I willed myself to scream inside my head instead. *Play dead!*

Choking down panic, I submitted and allowed my body to absorb the violent hits.

The beating was long and terrible.

Sleep did not come easy that night. I tossed and turned my sore body, unable to get into a comfortable position. I felt the indentations on the back of my legs where she had hit me the hardest. Jimmy and I did not speak about it. I willed myself to

sleep to escape the throbbing pain.

The next morning, the red welts that covered my arms, legs and torso had started to turn into dark-coloured purple bruises. I always wore a long sleeved shirt, and she hit me in places where clothing covered evidence. That way, there were no questions from others.

Up to now there had been many beatings but this one had been violent. I was quiet on my way to school that morning and Jimmy still had not asked me about it.

In the schoolboys' washroom, I looked in the mirror to see the welts. I was determined to tell my one school chum. That helped me get through school that day. My resolve was great to show and tell. *Look at what she did to me.*

Then it came into my mind, that if I did tell, he might go to the teacher or worse, his parents. I wasn't trying to get Morag into trouble; I wanted her to stop the beatings. What she did was wrong yet I could not bring myself to tell. It was such an odd feeling and it bothered me that I had this worry.

As the school day wore on, my determination to tell became weaker. I thought about the consequences. The nurse would be summoned to the school to examine me and Morag would be called in. I imagined Morag crying and making excuses. She could turn the tables on me and say it was my fault. Worse yet, she would formulate a plan of retaliation. The next beating would be even more severe. I was too scared to tell so I decided to live with it. No one but me watched my bruises turn green, then yellow.

I made a plan for next time.

I will choose the stick out of the wood box to give to her. A round one, not a sharp one.

I did a lot of screaming and imploring over the years. And when I did, she straddled and silenced me. Her hand was large enough to cover my mouth and nose. Sometimes she had me pull down my pants and that made me feel like I was submitting to her.

I cannot understand how she could do that to me and when I think back on it now, it is a wonder that I survived. When she was angry she had great strength in her hands and she was capable of bad things.

Like the time she killed the calf.

Another spring had arrived and the morning frost crunched under our feet as I followed Morag's heavy stride. She was anxious to get to the barn with her long-necked glass bottle filled with milk.

Morag believed in weaning calves early and she trained them to drink from a pail. It took Morag several tries, dipping her fingers into a pail of milk and allowing the calf to suck, as she brought her hand down inside the pail before the calf figured it out.

Calves were not allowed to drink from their mother's udder, as milk had to be rationed. Morag said it was easier to train a calf to drink from the pail if it wasn't permitted its mother's teat. Once weaned, calves stayed in the barn. Their mothers were turned out to pasture and would bawl pitifully for days after.

"Hurry up. That calf still isn't drinking," she said over her shoulder.

Morag was referring to one of the new calves. It was smaller than the others and had become weak. It still wasn't strong enough to stand on its own.

When Morag had first tried to get the calf to drink, she had pushed its head too deep and the calf tipped the pail, spilling precious milk. During the past two days, Morag had made numerous attempts to teach the calf how to drink from the pail.

The calf lay on the straw covered floor and when Morag went to kneel beside it, the other calves scuttled away. She took hold of the calf and tried to insert the milk bottle into its mouth but it backed away, knocking the bottle out of her hand. She tried holding the calf from the other side and that didn't work when the

calf knocked the bottle again.

“Son of a bitch.”

Morag was irritated and losing patience fast.

“Here, you hold it,” she said.

Although I did not want to, I had learned to obey Morag and had no choice but to hold the calf in my arms.

She made another attempt to insert the long neck of the bottle inside the calf’s mouth. The calf squirmed and struggled.

“Hold it tighter!” she said.

I could feel the calf trying to resist Morag’s efforts and it managed to squirm out of my arms.

“Damn you, Joe! You let it go!”

I started after the calf when Morag reached for a back leg and dragged its body toward her. She had no regard for the other leg that had become caught underneath, twisting it into an awkward position.

The calf looked uncomfortable.

“Hold it steady now!”

I restrained the calf and Morag pushed the bottle down hard on the calf’s mouth.

The calf pulled back.

“Stupid bloody bastard!”

I heard the wrath in the curse words Morag gritted out between her teeth.

The calf’s brown eyes bulged and nostrils flared as it choked on the bottle. I felt the calf’s sides heave when he writhed from under my grip. I was powerless to make Morag stop and I was scared for the calf. She changed the position of her hand to seal the bottle around the calf’s mouth and covered its nose.

I shut my eyes. I saw in my mind Morag squeezing my mouth and nose together with her big hand, smothering the screams rising from inside me.

Drink! Drink! I was willing the calf to choke down the milk.

My fingers brushed the thin skin covering the calf's stretched throat. I felt the ribbing in the windpipe move as the calf swallowed.

Good! I was relieved that the calf was drinking. Now Morag's anger would diminish. Instead, Morag pushed the bottle down further and again I saw the bulge of it in the calf's throat. She was determined to finish the task and upended the bottle to empty the contents.

The calf closed its eyes and went limp.

Milk ran backwards from the calf's mouth and spilled over my arm. Morag looked frightened. I settled the calf's motionless body onto the straw covered floor.

"Leave it for now," she said. Morag walked out. I stayed behind to finish feeding the other calves from my pail of milk.

Several times during the day, I slipped back into the barn to check on the asphyxiated calf. Every time I hoped the calf might be standing upright and alert, waiting for me to give it a drink of milk from the pail. Maybe he would have enough strength to run toward me like the other calves, and bleat and push his forehead into my legs, looking for the pail of milk. Instead, I found the calf in the same spot where I had placed him to rest.

Later that evening, Morag filled the milk bottle and we went to the barn. She knelt down beside the calf and lifted its legs to flop it over. Then she stood up, staring at the calf.

"It's dead," she pronounced. "Get rid of it."

I looked down at the innocent calf. There was no hope.

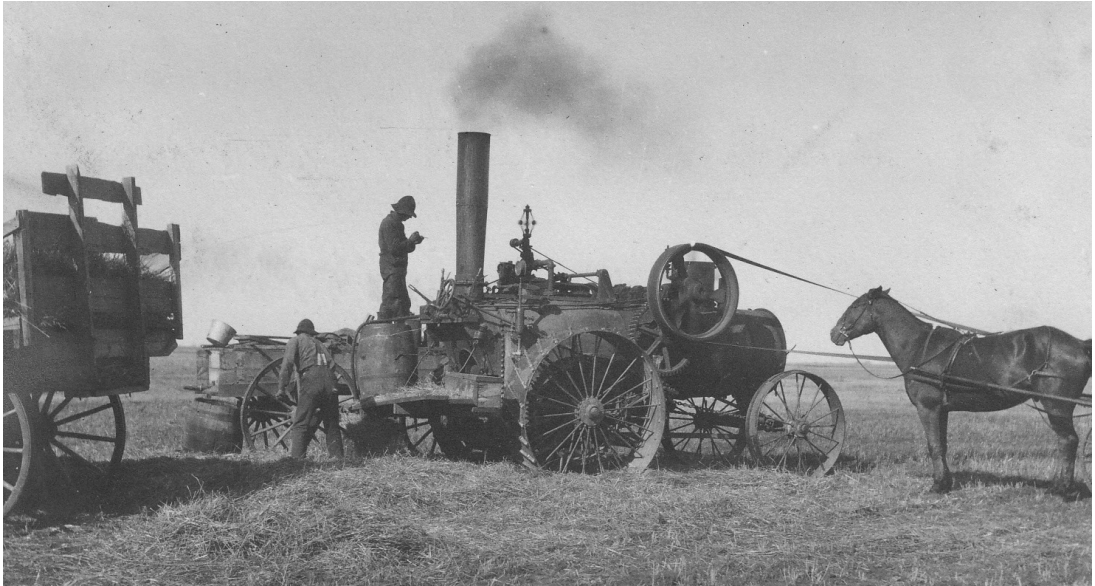
It had been senseless to force-feed the calf. There would be a terrible row tonight when Dad found out. *Will Dad find out?* I dragged the limp body away from the barn to a manure pile in the yard. I couldn't dig a large enough grave in the frozen earth. I caressed the calf, trying to smooth away the horrible acts Morag had done, before placing a large pile of straw over top and lighting a match. I walked down the east ravine, past the rocks in the bottom, to the wooden bridge across the road to walk off the

image of fear I had seen in the calf's eyes during his last hour.
Fear that I knew only too well.

*“Leaves may wither,
Flowers may die,
Friends may forget you,
But never will I.”*



When Luck Runs Out



Archives of Manitoba
Agriculture — Machinery — (c.1925) (157)

“Ross, where’s your mother?” Irene Kendal held her Brownie camera in one hand. Since Annie’s departure, Irene was the only cousin Morag allowed over for visits. I think Irene liked to check on us.

Mother? My mother? I have no mother. She would never be a mother to me. Whenever I was suppose to call Morag “mother” the word was muttered under my breath.

At the time Irene had turned up, Morag and her children were swishing the flies out of the house and I was helping by closing and opening the back door. There were so many flies that we had to swish the house almost every day. Dad had no money to fix window screens and over the course of a day, the flies found a way back in. Flies gathered and fed on the spilt milk and crumbs

on the floors. The floor was rarely scrubbed. We did wash floors but cleanliness was not Morag's priority and youngsters do not see the importance in washing and sweeping. And as long as Morag saw me actively washing and sweeping it did not matter to her if the wash water needed changing or if the floor came out clean. What mattered was that I kept busy.

Morag came to the door.

"I want to take the children's picture," Irene said.

Soon we were standing by the house, against the peeling paint on the walls.

I thought I saw a look of pity cross Irene's face. She stood back.

"Stand closer together." Irene placed her palm on my shoulder and lightly prodded me to stand next to Jimmy. Her smile was warm and I thought I smelled perfume. To cover up our grubbiness, Morag had told us to put on a shirt as we went around bare top most of the summer.

After the picture taking was done, Morag took Irene to show her the flower garden. We had helped to dig a plot on the south side of the house, close to the ravine. It had not been hard to dig up at the time and Morag had planted her favourites: Cosmos, Baby's Breath and Tiger Lilies.

I hoped Irene would miss the two galvanized tubs in the back yard, where our soiled clothing was soaking. We did not have a wringer washer like the Kendals and we never had clean clothes. Morag had put the wash into the tubs weeks earlier and a jellylike slime had formed on the water. Although I wanted to see the laundry done, you did not finish the washing without Morag's instruction. You did what you were told and everything had to be done under her watchful eye and only when she chose the time to do it. I tried to distract Irene's attention by picking up some fallen branches in the yard, to make her see from my activity that I was trying to improve things. Those two tubs sitting out in the yard, my whole world, were embarrassing to me.

When Morag did give me the go ahead to wring out the foul smelling clothes, I had to build up my nerve to complete the task. I hated putting my hands into the slime. I often hauled soft water from the dugout instead of the cold hard water from the well. That helped. It took several buckets to rinse the lines of white dust where the soap had jelled and hardened. After rinsing and wringing again, I hung the clothes on the line; Dad and Morag's bib overalls, our felt socks, fleeced-lined underwear and our school pants with elastic waistbands. The second tub held the children's denim combination overalls, with buttons and long sleeves. I hung everything out on the clothesline hooked to the house, with the other end attached to a tree. We did not have any rollers on the clothesline so we used a long pole to prop up the weight in the center. But every so often the whole thing collapsed to the ground. Most people would have rewashed the laundry but we did not.

I trailed behind Irene and Morag, to admire the flower bed. I was glad Irene had not ventured near the tubs. They chattered about what was doing well and what was not. Morag was in midsentence about stunted cosmos when Irene interrupted her.

"Morag, why is Ross so white in the face?" Irene had turned to look straight at me. She kept her attention fixed on my face. She asked again. "Why is Ross so white?"

That was the last time Irene came over. Morag put a stop to her visits. The two of them never crossed paths again. Morag might not say anything to a person's face but afterwards, she cursed and complained to Dad. There was plenty of that after Irene's last visit.

Irene did not stop her visits and she walked the mile from her house over the fields to see Dad. He stopped the horses to let them rest while they talked. I watched their silhouettes, outlined against the horizon, as they stood a few feet from one another. I guess she needed to talk to Dad. They probably talked about farm business and community affairs as Dad was involved with

the school board and Irene was connected with the church. Maybe Irene brought news back from England. Maybe she talked about Annie. Maybe she talked about us. Perhaps Annie had told Edna what went on in our house, who maybe told her mother who told Irene.

Sundays gave the workhorses time off and their open sores where skin rubbed against the collars, a chance to heal. While the horses had a well-deserved break, we usually worked around the farm instead of attending church like our Kendal cousins. I think if mother had still been alive, we would be in church too.

Willie Starling had come over to help Dad with some machinery. It was a perfect Sunday and a light breeze kept the flies away as Jimmy and I followed Willie and Dad around.

We had walked over to check on the seeder up by the road allowance when Irene Kendal and Aunt Emily came over the hill in their buggy. They were returning from church.

“Better the day, better the deed!” Willie called out. I wasn’t sure what Willie meant by that but his comment alerted me to a possible invitation to Irene to stop on the road so I hid in the bushes.

That was Willie; full of fun. Dad and Willie did not always get along but you would never know as Dad did not say anything bad about anyone.

Morag liked to invite Willie over for tea and he agreed to return to our farm later that Sunday evening.

“There are just too many.” Dad was talking about the grasshoppers that were eating up the fields of grain.

“Thick at my place too,” Willie answered. “Sure sign we’re in for another drought year.”

“If we don’t keep putting out poison they’ll eat the fields clean,” Morag said.

Jimmy and I had been sent to bed. We slept in the back bedroom the hired man once used, close to the kitchen. Jimmy,

who was old enough by now to do a working man's day of chores, was still too young to sit up with the adults in the kitchen. We listened to the conversation that had started out with hopes for rain and good crops but then the talk turned to the grasshopper infestation. Earlier in the week I had watched Morag set down more poison along the edges of the grain field. The grasshoppers were even making holes in the laundry left out on the line.

I heard Dad or maybe Morag, remove the lid from the teakettle on the woodstove and the sound of pouring water soon followed. Then, a distinctive creak from one of the kitchen chairs, reminded me of a bulky person sitting down. It had to be Morag all right. She had grown big again and Jimmy said she was going to have another baby soon.

I whispered in Jimmy's ear, "I wish I could have tea. I've an awful thirst right now."

Jimmy whispered back, "Ross, don't you think on it. Stay in bed. You know what she'll do to you later if you go in there."

Willie started to talk about plans for fall and he told Dad to try sowing fall rye. An early snowfall will keep the seeds from blowing off and help them sprout next spring, he said. The Starlings were good farmers and Dad, desperately trying to make our farm profitable, was eager to hear Willie's ideas. Last week Dad had told Morag that he was letting go of some of the farmland for taxes. Morag had nodded her head in agreement, "Yep. Too hard pressed to pay." It was no wonder they had money worries when they had to think about buying extras like grasshopper poison but I think the municipality ended up supplying local farmers with poisons. Farmers needed help eradicating insects and gophers.

I watched the bedbugs run back and forth along the metal frame of the headboard. Bedbugs came out at night and disappeared into our straw mattress during the day. Most mornings I had numerous tiny red spots that itched, over my arms

and across my body where the bugs had bitten me. In winter, they crawled inside my fleeced-lined underwear.

I tossed and turned to find a comfortable position. We did not have sheets and the blanket we shared was thin. The bedsprings were starting to come through as the straw in our mattress bag, made from used one hundred-pound flour sacks, had turned into chaff. Each morning, our bare feet made footprints in the straw dust that had fallen out of mouse-chewed holes in the cloth. We were glad to refill the mattress bag with fresh straw at harvest, not only to keep the bedsprings from poking us but to discard the strong ammonia smell from bed-wetting. Morag periodically fumigated our bed using a pump plunger and as she sprayed, she sang, "Joe, Joe, twelve years-old and still wets the bed, someone said!" Spraying did seem to help keep the bugs down.

One of Morag's children coughed in the next room. By now, there were seven children sleeping in the three beds set up for them. The adults stopped talking. Then Willie started up a new conversation.

"Have you had any hobos show up?"

Hobos!

I heard Jimmy catch his breath. We both listened attentively.

Morag said, "Is that the same as a tramp?"

We had heard that tramps or hobos were men who rode the rails across the prairies looking for work. They jumped off in small towns, walking to nearby farms in hope of doing chores in exchange for a meal. It was unlikely we would ever meet one, living four and a half miles from town. Then again, Morag could find work for a hobo. She could have him help me move rocks. It took effort to lift the heavy rocks over the sides into the gravel box. Heavier rocks and large boulders had to be moved by horse and chain. The horse dragged the dead weight out to the edge of the field or into the bush line. Either way, the job of moving rocks

by hand and boulders with a horse went better with two people. I thought a tramp could be helpful on the farm.

“I guess,” Willie answered.

“No,” said Morag. “Not yet. If one turns up, I’ll turn him out on his ear, for sure.” My back stiffened knowing what she was capable of doing.

“Besides, we can’t afford to feed strangers,” she added.

No helper for me.

Days passed and soon the harvest from scanty grain fields was finished and the cows were moved to stubble fields to feed off the remaining crops.

I had to bring the milk cows back to the barn before supper and the walk was a long one on an empty stomach. After supper, it was time for me to return to the barn to milk all of them. And by this time of day, as tired as I always seemed to be, it was my job to herd them back to the stubble fields. Morag made sure of that.

Despite no rain that summer, thistles grew everywhere in large patches; in some places, hundreds of feet in width. In order to save my running shoes for school, I did my chores in bare feet and ran through the thistles because the way was shorter to get to the cows from the other end of the field. My bare feet stung from the thistles and rubbing them into fresh cow dung helped to ease the discomfort.

One day, while walking to the field to bring in the milk cows, I came across a rabbit’s foot on the ground. It was right in my path. I bent down to pick it up and wondered where it may have come from as I had not seen it before. At first, I thought it was a remnant from a fresh kill, left behind by a prairie wolf but the severed end had dried up. I had heard dad’s former hired man say that a rabbit’s foot could be lucky, so I put it in my pocket. *Maybe a hobo dropped it.*

I looked up and to my surprise the milk cows were standing close by! I took the rabbit’s foot out of my pocket to have another

look at it. *My lucky rabbit's foot!* It had saved me from having to run through the thistles to the far end of the field. As I walked behind the cows back to the barn, I patted the outside of my pocket to make sure my rabbit's foot was safely tucked away. It felt good to have something that belonged to me and I was so in awe of its power that I did not even tell Jimmy. *Finders keepers.* I had to make sure Morag did not find it on me. She would be sure to take it and say, "Joe, why are you using luck to do your chores?" And her criticism would likely be accompanied by a hard slap across my head.

The next day, while Dad and Jimmy were over at the neighbours helping with a job, I washed the breakfast dishes. Water ran down my upper arms to my elbows and soaked my shirt. Morag did not like me standing on a chair at the counter. She sat at the table, supervising me, as her children played on the floor. Someone knocked on the front door. Curious, I tiptoed behind Morag who had opened the door to a tall and skinny looking man wearing a dirty suit. His beard was long and scraggly and his face looked drawn and tired.

"Morning ma'am." The man took off his hat and held it with shaking hands. "I'm looking for work. Room and board if you have it."

She appeared to be fearful of him. Her usual scowl had disappeared and her negative demeanor was absent.

"Sorry, we don't have any work but wait out front and I'll make you a lunch," she said in a soft tone I had not heard before.

She made a hearty lunch of sandwiches from hardboiled egg slices with lettuce out of the garden, on homemade bread. I saw her hands tremble as she took the wooden box down from the cupboard that was used to carry the noon meal to Dad and Jimmy when they worked the fields. Morag inserted a page from one of the mail catalogs inside the bottom of the box, before placing the sandwiches along with biscuits, she had cooked up in the frying

pan with a bit of grease that morning.

She gave the box to the hobo, wished him a good day and waved him away.

A few days later, Jimmy and I found the wooden box on the other side of the ravine, past the rows of the cottonwood trees that grew on the west side of our farm. I thought of all the sandwiches and biscuits Morag had packed inside the box but there was nothing left, not one crumb. The hobo must have eaten the contents while sitting under one of the trees and I imagined him eating his fill, as he read the catalog page. We never thought we would see the box again and Dad was pleased we had found it. I patted the rabbit's foot in my pocket and silently praised it. *Good job.*

That evening, I obtained permission from Dad to spend the next night with my chum, Patrick Kelly. I called him Pat. His family lived close to town and the railroad went through part of their farm over a wooden bridge. I had decided to ask Dad, in front of Morag, if I could stay overnight at Pat's. I knew what the answer would be if I only asked Morag. I looked at her for confirmation.

"Dad said alright," she said.

My rabbit's foot was still working.

I was happy that Pat had asked me and the next day, after school, I walked with him to his house. Pat knew what time the freight train was due to pass through and we walked to the bridge that evening to wait. I told him about the hobo that had come to the house. Perhaps the same hobo was on the very train we were expecting.

"Do you know any hobo songs, Ross?"

"No," I said. "Do you?"

"I know a bit of one."

He started to sing a familiar tune but when he started laughing, he stopped.

"Sing more," I said.

Soon we were singing together until we heard the sound of the train in the distance. I had to hold my hands over my ears

when the cars crossed over the wooden bridge, *clickety clack, clickety clack*. The thunderous sounds that echoed down to us below reverberated deep inside my chest and I wondered if I caught it, would the train carry me to Uncle John.

Our cows were forever wandering into neighbours' fields. After breakfast, Dad and Jimmy left to fix the fence on the government road. If Dad did not get around to fixing fences, he made a "cowpoke" by nailing two boards together into a "V" shape and placed this around the cow's neck. A third board was added to close the gap. The cowpoke acted like a large collar and prevented the animal from removing it over its head. Cowpokes were meant to prevent a meandering cow from cutting through a broken fence. Hungry cows are desperate and will tear down fences by leaning over the fence to eat grass. I think Dad's cowpokes actually enabled the cows to rip down fencing, and once a passageway came clear, the rest of the herd followed suit.

I was glad Dad and Jimmy were getting around to fixing the fence after hearing the kids on the school van laugh at one of our cows the week before. We had watched the cow make futile attempts to graze the grass along the edge of the road. The boards around her neck made her look awkward and I felt sorry for the cow. The kids' laughter had embarrassed me and confirmed what I already knew: We were the poorest farmers in the area and the laughing stock of the neighbourhood.

At least by Monday morning our cows were free of cowpokes again.

Weeks passed and I was still carrying my lucky rabbit's foot. Our cows had not wandered away nor torn down any fencing. I figured if I kept it a secret the luck would carry on. It seemed to be working with the milk cows as most times they were standing close by, away from the thistle patch, waiting for me, instead of at the far end of the field. My chores had become easier.

One Saturday afternoon, while I was busy pulling onions out of the garden, I heard Morag's yelling and I followed the sounds to the front of our shanty house to see her striking the back of a cow with a corn broom. I sensed its panic, as the cow tried to move her large cumbersome body away from my stepmother's heavy whacks. The cow had managed to get through the front yard fence and was on the road. Our cows were always hungry. They were great at finding an opening to escape now that the grass inside the fenced yard had been eaten. Morag threw the broom like a javelin and a string of her obscenities followed in the air.

Morag marched back toward the house and picked up the broom. Her angry steps caused the apron she was wearing to flap against her pant legs. In a threatening gesture, she waved the broom at the cow, now grazing the grass growing on the side of the road. Morag was hard on animals and kicked them in the belly to make them move. When she came close to an animal they shied away, and bumped against one another, pushing over a weak fence, which only infuriated Morag. This cow was far enough away.

Morag saw me standing in the drive. "Joe! Get that cow!"

I did not need to be told twice. Without a switch or rope, I was going to have a tough time trying to turn the cow back into the yard and keep her there while I repaired the fence. I closed the gate and started for the cow that was still grazing in the ditch.

At that moment, Irene was coming down the road in her buggy. She was headed for town. I did not want Irene to see me. I had changed into my old bib coveralls. Small nails were woven into the ripped places to help keep everything together. When visitors came around, I made myself scarce because I was ashamed of wearing threadbare clothes and being in bare feet. Runners and good clothes had to be saved for school. The back of my neck started to sweat and I dove for the bushes in the ditch.

That's when I thought about the rabbit's foot in my one good pocket. I hoped it would cause Irene to drive on by but

instead the buggy came to a stop. I hunkered down. *Maybe she won't see me!* I rubbed the rabbit's foot frantically. That's when the cow decided to move into the middle of the road.

"Hello Ross! Need some help with that cow?" Irene called out again, "Ross! Need some help?"

"No, that's all right. I can manage her," I called back. But the cow was blocking the path of the buggy and I had no choice but to emerge from the ditch.

"Alright Ross!"

In full view of Irene, I started for the cow.

"Good luck with her," Irene said as she passed.

Dad should have left a cowpoke on you miserable cow.

The next few days, the milk cows were standing at the far end of the field causing me to run through the thistle patch to bring them home. As before, I walked to the pasture and held my rabbit's foot in the palm of my hand, wishing the cows were standing close by, to find they were not. The thistles were drying out by now, and were becoming brittle. When I knelt down to pick out another splinter from the sole of my foot, I threw the rabbit's foot as far as I could into the middle of the thistle patch.

My luck had run out.

*"Remember 'tis a friend that penned
These lines to thee."*



Born in Summer

Cows were a large part of my growing up. Cows that were not milked twice a day soon dried up, so milking cows by hand was done before and after school. Without fail, when I escorted the cows back and forth from the pasture at milking time, there was always a ruckus. Cows called to their calves, penned in the other barn, and the calves answered with pitiful bawling. Dad did not allow our calves to run with their mothers in the pasture, saying, “They have to wean.” I never got used to the noise.

It was a daily ritual to place “cow-kickers,” a chain and clamp gadget, across a cow’s knees prior to milking. Cows that had cut or ripped a teat on barbwire fencing still had to be milked. The painful looking sores took time to heal. Applying Vaseline helped and kept bothersome horseflies away yet it must have hurt when I squeezed out the milk. That was the main reason why I needed to restrain the back legs. Yet even with “cow-kickers” a cow occasionally succeeded in placing a foot inside the milk pail. Precious milk was lost as there was no way to remove her leg without upending the pail.

When a wary cow knew you were not the regular “milker” she took longer to milk. I managed around that by taking the time to be friendly, reassuring them that they were safe with me. The investment paid off. I found a rhythm to milking and worked in a continuous and predictable motion. That made the task easier for both me and the cow. I talked to the cow in a soothing tone and took care not to make any sudden movements with the board we used across a wooden box as a milking stool. Milking could have been an easier job, and more so if there had been a way of keeping the tail from swishing in my face.

Cows were at our mercy. They need the farmer as much as the farmer needs them. I helped Dad during calving and recall witnessing a dead calf protruding from the rear of a cow. The cow

wandered aimlessly and moaned. I do not remember what we did but I am sure we had to help. It was also disturbing to see a cow in difficulty when the back end of a calf came out instead of shoulders first. When the calf did emerge, the sight of it gladdened my heart. Every calf was important.

After supper, cows were milked and returned to the pasture for the night. Laddie helped me herd them. When the border collie wasn't nipping at my heels, he tried to herd or chase me. He liked to be patted but if I came up on him too quickly he showed his teeth, revealing sharp looking incisors. He was useful helping to round up the cows and he was capable of killing the large rats that were forever chewing holes through the barn boards. He was a happy dog and I liked him well enough.

This particular evening, prairie wolves howled in the distance and Laddie's ears perked up. He wasn't scared of the wolves that preyed on skunks, jack rabbits and calves. Cattle had a better chance around wolves than calves. Then again, a lone cow wasn't any match for a pack of wolves. Mother Nature can be cruel. That's another reason why our calves were penned up in the yard site.

No one could afford to lose a calf or a cow and a local neighbor routinely hunted down wolves. He was more successful in winter; it was easier to track them and deep snow tired out a wolf. He had a horse that liked to jump fences so they traveled far in search of wolves. I often saw a dead wolf strapped to the back of his horse. Wolves are predators and not a farmer's friend.

By now it was dusk and the light from the crescent moon illuminated the white spots on the cows.

I had to feel my way along the fence to the gate opening. Morag did not allow any of us to cut through fences. She was not a seamstress and if our clothing became ripped, it stayed that way. Too bad the cows did not have the same foresight.

I found the gate opening. Our gates were difficult to open and close. A loop on the bottom had to be undone as well as another

loop on top, then the gate post had to be pushed back into position inside both loops. I wasn't tall or strong enough to maneuver the top of the gate post back into the loop unless I leaned my body into the bottom part of the post. Opening and closing the gate was a man's job, not a young teenager's but I had figured out how to make the gate easier to close by placing the top of the post in first.

Once the cows were all inside and the gate closed up for the night, Laddie and I crossed the pasture. I wanted to check on a cow and her calf. This cow had turned out to be a poor milker and Dad had made the unusual decision to leave her in the pasture with her calf for summer. *Lucky calf.*

I had watched the calf's birth with fascination and saw how it stubbornly made its way to a standing position. It had taken a nosedive to the ground, trying to stand on wobbly legs. While the calf was doing this, the mother ate the birth sac and then turned to lick her calf all over. It was as if she was encouraging her calf to stand on his own as she caressed it with her broad tongue. I raced home that day to tell an interested Morag. We were down to three calves and the new addition was welcomed. Ever since the calf's birth, I had taken a special interest in him. He had a distinguishable brown spot around one eye and was smaller than the other calves.

The cow pulled away from her calf. I was close enough to hear the smacking sound when the calf became disengaged from her teat. We had come up on her too quick. Without any warning, the cow charged us. *She must think we're wolves!*

Laddie yelped and ran ahead of me. I followed pursuit and ran full tilt with the cow beating the ground with her hoofs behind me. It was a frightening moment when I realized the gate was too far away. *We'll never make it!*

Right then, Laddie made a hard right turn and dived under the barbwire fence. There was no time to spare. I took Laddie's lead. *Safe!*

"Good boy!" I called out to him. Laddie came close to me,

panting hard and had an excited look in his eyes. I reached down to pat him. That dog could be counted on during times of trouble and he was not afraid of anything. Once during a lightning storm, Laddie had stood out in the yard, sniffing the air when Willie called him to take protection with us in the barn. Laddie followed us inside and Willie had said, "Good boy!" While rubbing Laddie's ears affectionately, Willie had remarked, "Not afraid of summer storms, or anything for that matter are you, pup? Must have been born in summer! That's right, born in summer!"

He certainly was not afraid of storms. Another time, during a blizzard, Morag had the idea that Laddie should be placed in the barn for safety. He usually slept outside. Laddie followed me into the barn and yelped when I shut the door. "It's for your own good!" I yelled back through the door. The winds and Laddie howled all that night.

The next morning, Morag and I had trudged to the barn to shovel out the snow that the winds had blown up against the doors.

I had been surprised to find Laddie curled up in a snow bank next to the barn. He lifted his head as I came nearer. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw a hole chewed in the barn door. Laddie must have worked at it for some time to make an opening large enough to pass through. *Maybe he had learned from the rats.*

That was how Laddie managed through that blizzard and I never worried about him again.

I am not sure if Laddie had been born in summer. He may not have been afraid of lightening, blizzards or wolves but he sure had been afraid of that cow.

*"A faithful friend is hard to find but, when you have one,
Bear this in mind, as I shall when I think of you
Being a lasting friend, both kind and true."*



Disappointments



Manitoba Archives
Agriculture — Farms — 1944 Harvesting (20)

“Jimmy, let’s work on your essay some more. I thought of something,” Dad whispered. Jimmy rolled out of bed and headed for the kitchen.

Dad was educated, earning his degree before moving to Canada. He read books and subscribed to newspapers. As a member of the school board, he liked to chair the meetings from the teacher’s desk. That way he could kick off his felt socks. Dad’s bunions made him uncomfortable so he went around in bare feet as often as possible. At teacher’s desk, Dad may not have

looked the part of an educated man.

I heard paper rustling. Dad always cleaned the chimney glass with a piece of old newspaper before lighting the lamp. Night after night for the past week, Dad and Jimmy had worked diligently on the essay. Every year the School District gave out scholarships, and Jimmy, now in grade ten, wanted to enter an essay. There was no money to buy schoolbooks and winning a scholarship meant Jimmy could qualify for vocational training, opening doors for a career.

They worked together. Dad urged Jimmy on. "Write it like this!" Then they took turns reading passages of the essay out loud.

"That's loads better. Rewrite that last bit and once you're done turn down the wick and blow it out," Dad said. I do not know how long it took Jimmy to finish his essay for I was long asleep before he turned in.

In time, we learned that Jimmy did not win the scholarship. If Dad and Jimmy were disappointed, they did not let on.

A few weeks before Victoria Day, Jimmy and I decided to make our own garden out of an old straw pile left over from the former year's threshing gang. The pile had turned into compost and it was loamy and easy to work. I envisioned harvesting carrots and peas from our new garden.

Morag did not allow us to use her garden tools so we resorted to an old cultivator that had been abandoned in the bush line. It was a one-horse cultivator used in the past to till fields of potatoes. As Jimmy had more strength to push the cultivator, he harnessed me up to it and I pulled it through the compost pile while he pushed. I made out I was a horse and whinnied. As kids we had often played "horsy" so it seemed like old times. I leaned into the harness, putting one foot in front of another, and pulled the cultivator while Jimmy called out like our dad, "Gee!" and "Haw!" He guided the cultivator by the handles and controlled the

depth of the blade that cut through the loamy soil. It was great fun. Soon we were beside ourselves giggling but we managed to progress and get the job done.

Morag stared at us from the big garden. “You’ll never make a go of it. The cows will get into it.”

I winced at her critical words.

Morag was a good gardener. The fence did keep the cows out of her garden. But fences did not stop rabbits and wildlife from coming and helping themselves.

Morag only allowed us to work our garden in our spare time and she made sure we had plenty of other duties. It was tricky to make time for it. Still we kept at the patch and gradually over the summer, our garden grew. Dad showed us how to pollinate the pumpkin and marrow flowers and we sneaked water to feed the plants and soon our garden produce was looking larger than hers.

“Boys, you’ve done good work here. You’ll have some pumpkins and marrow soon.” Dad was impressed.

Morag stayed clear of our garden. I am sure she was not in favour of us working our garden as that took us away from other work. I wondered how she planned to pay us back. I was always waiting, so to speak, for the other shoe to drop.

One day, two government men turned up in the yard with a wagon. They were collecting scrap metal for the war effort. Farmers were asked to contribute unused implements and old pieces of machinery. It was a good way to clean up yard sites. Morag directed the men about the farm to pick up pieces of rusty and broken down farm implements.

“Take that too.” She pointed to the side of the barn where our prized cultivator stood. *No!*

I could not believe my eyes when the men picked it up and carried it to the wagon. Then again, Dad would not miss it.

The men pulled out of the yard with our cultivator sitting high on top of a pile of iron and steel. Any idea to make our own

garden next year had vanished. The cultivator that had helped us enjoy some independence was headed out of the yard to be melted down at the foundry, along with all the other rubbish.

The hot summer passed and between the drought, heat and grasshoppers, there was no threshing that year. High winds had transported the grasshoppers into the middle of the crops; avoiding the line of poison Dad and Morag had sprinkled along the edge of the fields.

Poor crops meant less feed. To help stretch rations, we fed the cows green Russian thistles. But soon that supply ran out. Cows, even famished ones will not eat dried out thistles. What was once edible was now unusable. The drought made us vulnerable to fire so we burned the thistles with care. I despaired that we had next to nothing to feed our poor cows and before long their milk dried up. Food was scarce for both livestock and us. And that winter, besides pumpkin and marrow soup, we lived on hope for a better year.

*“Tickle it with a hoe and
it will laugh into a harvest.”*



A Different Christmas

“Betty and Marty are coming for Christmas.”

Morag refolded the letter back inside the envelope. Morag and her sister, Betty, exchanged letters often.

“Alright,” Dad said. He sounded interested.

“They’re coming on the train. Saturday after next.”

“I’ll pick them up from the station.”

I listened intently while washing the dishes in the pan. *Morag’s sister coming to visit!* I wondered what she was like. Betty and her husband, Marty, lived two hundred miles away and I gathered they were good farmers. Betty’s letters talked about selling eggs and receiving regular cream cheques. The letters painted a picture of a prosperous farm. Morag usually cursed after reading one of Betty’s letters and I had the feeling that Morag was jealous of her sister and husband. I did not know much about Morag’s past or her family.

I went outside to tell Jimmy the news. He was down by the dugout chopping a hole in the ice to draw water for the cattle.

“Guess what?”

Jimmy stood up to look at me.

“We’re having company. Morag’s sister and husband. For Christmas.”

“How are they getting here?”

“They’re coming on the train.”

“Do they have any kids?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

We never had visitors and it was exciting to think of having company. Up to now our Christmases consisted of Dad purchasing a box of apples, unshelled peanuts and hard-boiled ribbon candy. He would print our names on small brown paper bags and dole out the treats. Christmas parcels from England had stopped coming as the war was on by then. It was probably difficult for my grandparents to send packages. Uncle John mailed us presents from the west coast. I could count on a belt or tie although I never owned a suit. That was our Christmas.

Most families hung stockings on the fireplace mantle or near the chimney but our family did not uphold this tradition - we did not own socks. Instead, Dad would present our brown paper bags to us on Christmas Day. I always hid mine from Morag's children. That way I could ration the treats, and make them last. If my half siblings knew I still had candy, they wanted it and if Morag found out, she made me eat it all up in one sitting.

One Christmas, to make my bag of candy last, I hid it in the woodpile. I shared my candy with Jimmy while bucksawing wood. But during a warm spell, to my dismay, I discovered the candies had solidified together and dripped down into the wood pile to nothing.

This was going to be a different Christmas, and over the next few weeks our house was turned upside down as Morag prepared for her visitors. A feeling of warm anticipation washed over me.

To Morag, Christmas wasn't Christmas without a goose so she sent Jimmy and me to Tom's farm with a dollar bill, which seemed like a lot of money. As the oldest, Jimmy had the responsibility of holding the cash. Tom's farm was about a mile and a quarter across the fields from our place. Jimmy passed over the dollar bill and Tom's father placed a cackling goose inside an old torn potato sack. Jimmy grabbed the sack by one end and I held onto the other. The goose found a hole and kept poking out its sharp beak to peck us. It was heavy and soon we were dragging

the sack with the writhing goose inside, across the snow packed trail. Every step closer home meant the fate of the goose in Morag's hands was drawing near. And we did not intend to allow it to escape.

Walking back across the ravine, we could smell Morag's cake. Morag rarely baked cakes or cookies. I had seen the frugal helping of raisins she had set out on the kitchen table so I guess she wanted to have something special for her visitors.

When we arrived in the kitchen, the cake was sitting on the table. The top was black and an acrid smell of burnt raisins filled the room. The green wood (it was all we had) was difficult to start burning but once it caught, it burned hot. Morag, who had poor control of the oven, did not have much patience for baking. She prepared a white icing from grinding table sugar with a rolling pin and mixed this into a bit of milk before covering the blackened top. *She can't fool me.*

Dad went to the station and brought Betty and Marty home. I was surprised when I met Morag's sister. She was not what I had expected. Morag had built a bad reputation of her sister. I thought she would be like Morag but instead she was slender, smiled pleasantly and wore a dress trimmed with lace under her fur coat. Marty was tall and well dressed. He did not say very much during the entire visit. Betty seemed to do all the talking. He smiled a lot.

There were no kids.

"So who's this?" Betty asked. She gave me a broad smile and I saw white evenly spaced teeth.

Dad introduced us all and it felt good to be noticed. I had questions, but children did not ask, and parents decided what and how much to tell you.

Betty opened their suitcase and took out cookies, fruitcake and oranges. *Oranges!* I had always received an orange after each Christmas concert. Someone from the school board would place a bright orange on each desk. Oranges were a treat and here Betty

had brought some. *Just for us.*

Morag acknowledged the oranges, cookies and fruitcake and put the items away up on a shelf in the cupboard. She thanked Betty graciously. Morag could be a charmer when someone else came around.

“I also brought a smoked ham,” Betty said revealing an object wrapped in brown paper, tied with string. Morag took the ham and nodded her thanks to Betty before placing it in the cupboard, next to the fruitcake.

The next day, we had a Christmas dinner like no other. We all crowded around the table. The goose had been in the oven for hours and filled the air with succulent smells. I smacked my lips while Morag sliced into the crusty skin of the roast goose and dished up a piece of the dark, greasy meat onto my plate. Betty cut slices of ham and had us pass the plate around. She treated us all the same and urged us to take seconds. I would never guess that Morag and Betty were sisters.

When dinner was over, Betty took my place in the dish pan and Morag helped to tidy up the kitchen. It felt like a holiday; no whippings or curse words from Morag, and no dishes.

After supper, the adults sat at the table with the kerosene lamp in the middle and the four of them played cards. After that, Betty and Marty retired to Dad and Morag’s room, and Jimmy and I slept with the children so Dad and Morag could sleep in our bed.

The second night, Dad and Marty went to visit the neighbours. That evening, after supper, Betty cleared the table and returned from her room with the stack of playing cards.

“Ross, Jimmy, come over here,” Betty said with a warm smile while she dealt out the cards.

We owned a deck of cards but were not allowed to play at home. The only time I played cards was on the school van. Sometimes Morag played Solitaire at the kitchen table while Dad read his paper. Morag had never shown us how to play and here

was her sister taking me by the hand and teaching me how to hold the cards with their intricate red and black patterns. Betty motioned to Morag to help Jimmy.

“Ross, do you know Whist?” Betty asked. “Here, sit up to the table and we’ll teach you.”

Betty helped me understand how to follow the suits, of Hearts, Spades, Clubs and Diamonds and when to trump. She was a good teacher and I caught on quickly. It was fun to anticipate which card to play next.

I was sad to see Betty and Marty leave. Betty had been kind to us. Maybe she saw the divide between us and Morag’s children. I did not have to duck Morag’s constant slaps and hear her disparaging comments, “You better watch your step.” But once Betty and Marty left, everything went back to normal, if you could call it that.

I cannot ever imagine that Morag’s sister would hurt anyone intentionally. Shortly after the visit, Morag came after me with a hot baking sheet of biscuits she had retrieved from the woodstove. She had worn a silly grin on her face and lunged at me. She caused me to back into a sharp corner of the large cupboard hutch. The pain in my back made me dizzy and I felt myself starting to black out. I reached out for the table to steady myself and I felt sick to my stomach and my ears were ringing. I thought I was going to die. Morag dropped the pan back on top of the stove, and was holding her sides, laughing her head off. She enjoyed a joke on me.

When the faintish feeling passed, I broke into a cold sweat. I found my way to the bench to try and recover. My rest did not last long. “Get going on your chores!”

The next day, when she pulled the hot tray of biscuits from the oven she came toward me and, knowing her game, I backed out of harm’s way and fell into the cellar. I did not know if she had opened the trap door purposely. I hit my head on the top edge, as I fell down the steps. Morag laughed. The incident appeared to

improve her mood. The Christmas spirit that had reigned in our house during Betty and Marty's visit had vanished and the boogeyman had returned.

*"Fame is not gained at a single bound
But we build the ladder by which we rise
From the lowly earth to the vaulted skies
And we mount to its summit round by round."*



The Birds and the Bees

In days past, people visited farms with their stallions to “sire” or inseminate mares. They did not need to travel far, maybe five or ten miles to find customers. Farmers, including my Dad were willing to pay stallion fees and I remember having three or four colts born on our farm throughout the years. I did not know when or how mares were impregnated but when these people visited with their stallions, baby colts followed.

One time, I was aware of a visitor who had brought a stallion over. But visitor and stallion were now out of sight. Then my dad and the neighbours led one of our mares to the back of the barn. I wondered what was happening and so I followed the sound of the ruckus. I had not been told not to go there but I did not have permission either. As I drew closer to the scene, I witnessed a most dramatic event. It was alarming to watch, and I was immediately sorry that I had gone there.

I backed away and rushed to return to my task at hand but before I could reach my destination, two of my half-siblings came towards me.

As I had been in such awe, I blurted out, “You should’ve seen what I just saw!” I do not recall what I may have told them,

if anything. When her children turned and ran back to their mother, I knew I was in deep trouble.

It was usual to suffer daily beatings and I do not remember them all nor think about them. But on the day I saw the mare sired, Morag had been determined to restore my childhood innocence.

I was certain I would take the memory of that beating to my grave.

*“Remember me in sadness
Remember me in love
Remember me dear sister
Until we’ll meet above.”*



Annie



I recalled picking crocuses for Annie and the day we brought home the Christmas parcel.

Dad arranged for Jimmy and me to attend the local Annual Churches' Picnic. The United Church and Anglican Church joined up each year due to their small congregations. Morag's children did not attend the picnics and I think this was because the event was tied to the Kendals.

James, Irene and their children came over by buggy to pick us up. This was a special time as we never attended Sunday school or church like the Kendals did. Irene must have talked Dad into allowing us to go. We were also looking forward to seeing Annie again, who

was attending the picnic with Edna Kendal and her family. We did not see Annie often, now that she was in high school.

We ran to Annie, who took us to lineup for the food. It was my first time eating hotdogs and ice-cream; both were absolutely delicious.

It felt good to be sitting with her and my cousins and we owed this event all to Irene who looked out for us and treated us like family.

Annie encouraged us to participate in the races and try for prizes. I found my age group and entered a bag race with another boy. I was so hoping we would win the prize of a few cents but we lost. One of the game organizers tussled my hair and said, "Don't feel bad. Someone wins and someone has to lose." Another ice-cream cone made me happy again.

Besides games and races, children splashed and played in the shallow end of a dugout. Men wearing bathing suits took turns diving in the deep end. We stood and watched with Annie.

"I might train to be a teacher next year," she stated.

Annie was happy. I saw it in her face. Her auburn curls bounced against her face when she laughed. She was sixteen years-old. She told us about the young soldier she was dating. He had enlisted in the Air Force and was waiting for his call to go overseas. Annie had a carefree air about her and the promise of the future hung in the air. She fitted in with Edna's family. No longer did she have to cringe under Morag's constant blows. Those days were far behind her.

"Why are you so quiet, Ross?" Annie asked. I smiled at her. "Maybe you tired yourself out with trying to win games!" She gave me a playful push.

I was quiet but not from being tired out from a day filled with fun. I was not looking forward to returning home. These days were filled with dread. Rows were frequent between Morag and Dad and the arguments were over Jimmy and me. Dad always

defended us when Morag complained about something we did or did not do. But for now, I had a few hours of freedom and enjoyed my ice-cream cone while watching the boys go swimming in the dugout. That was the first and last time I ever went to the Annual Churches' Picnic.

It was difficult to concentrate on afternoon lessons despite the longer recess the teacher had allowed.

When the bell rang, excited students spilled down outside the school steps and chatter filled the air. *Tomorrow is Field Day!* The entire school planned to meet in the next town, ten miles away, to compete with neighbouring schools. Morag's children were too young to attend.

Sleep did not come easy that night and I had vivid dreams about baseball and three-legged races.

By morning it was all I could do to finish my chores.

"Get your chores done or you're going to miss your ride and not go!" Morag said. If Jimmy and I missed the truck in town there would be no Field Day for us. I was looking forward to seeing Annie and our cousins again at the fairgrounds. Our visits with Annie were rare.

I was glad to get away for another reason too. Morag and Dad were planning to take down and clean the chimney pipes. The pipes dented easily and Morag and Dad always had trouble refitting everything back together. On occasion new pipes were bought, but money was scarce and it was a job that always ended in a row.

The house had been built in sections and chimney pipes extended throughout to help heat the extra rooms. The pipes, which were hung with wire across the ceilings, had to be removed and taken outside to clean. Burning green wood created a buildup of creosote in the pipes. Seasoned wood burned better but there wasn't much around. Cleaning the pipes helped reduce chimney fires but it was a day to stay away from the yard.

Chimney fires were a worry and seemed to occur during windstorms when the damper was left open too long. The wind outside caused a draft and the stovepipe became red hot. Serious fires occurred twice a winter and it was a wonder the house, which had wood shingles, never caught on fire. Chimney fires required Dad to climb up on top of our shanty roof and douse the flames with a pail of water. This made a terrible mess when the water ran down into the stove. Some people used salt but that cost money. Fires were a reminder that we did not have access to seasoned wood so when Morag and Dad started taking apart the chimney pipes, Jimmy and I were glad to leave for town.

Dad must have made arrangements with the municipality to take any of us who did not have a ride to the field grounds. Most of the other students went with their families, including their parents, in horse-drawn buggies or by car. Jimmy and I had to walk the four and a half miles to town. I was sure we were the poorest family in the area but my embarrassment diminished, when I saw another kid waiting also, at the pickup location in town. He grinned at me and I smiled back. I had been hoping that someone else, like us, needed a ride too. Maybe we were not the poorest family after all; there was another one just like us.

We waited together for our ride. It was a cool day and looked like rain. I rubbed my arms to keep warm. Jimmy and I had been told to leave our jackets at home. I guess Morag was afraid we might lose or leave our jackets behind at the field grounds.

Our ride turned up and like lonesome cattle, the three of us climbed into the back of the local farmer's truck to travel cross-country over the miles of gravel to our destination. We stood close to the cab to avoid the cool wind. Now that we were on the truck and on our way to the field grounds, my anxiety subsided and I had a feeling of happy anticipation again. I double checked my pants pocket for the precious quarter-piece Morag had grudgingly doled out that morning.

We found Annie and our cousins at the field grounds but there was no time for visiting. The organizers had started Field Day. We stood at attention in the brisk air and waited for the other school teams to march into the field. Then it was our turn. Children were divided up into teams to play sports. I was never asked to play baseball; I was too small for my age. Only the best players were chosen. I was still freezing and hoped for some warmth in the afternoon.

I stood off and met up with Earl Kimball. He was a year younger than me. We had become friends when I had failed grade four. The teacher had moved me to sit near him. She probably had thought he could help me.

"Hi Ross!" Earl greeted me. His mother, standing next to him, smiled at me.

"Boys, I want to give you something." Mrs. Kimball opened her handbag and gave us each five shining coppers. *Now I have thirty cents!*

"Thank you!" I said. The coins were a welcome addition.

After the baseball games, we lined up at the concession stand. I studied all the jars of penny candy. I had enough money to buy four types of candy and a package of gum. *It will last for weeks!*

Annie walked over to sit with me. Jimmy was playing with his friends.

"Ross, how are you doing in school?" she asked.

I did not know how to answer Annie. I guess she asked because she was interested in training as a teacher. She knew I stammered and that school was difficult for me.

"Alright," I replied. I did not want to tell her about failing a grade.

"Just do your best and everything will turn out," she said. "An education is important."

I thought she might ask me how things were going at home. I was glad she did not as I did not want to think about home. I was

enjoying Field Day and being able to spend time with my sister.

She patted my arm and looked me in the eye. Her smile warmed my heart.

When Jimmy and I returned home we found Dad and Morag sitting at the kitchen table having tea, their faces smeared with black soot. Morag's children were on the floor playing. It looked like it had been a trying day but they must have succeeded as the pipes were all fitted together and back in place. The job had been completed, or so I thought.

"You'll have to get the chimney man to come again." Morag said to Dad.

So they had not had success after all. It turned out that upon Dad's closer inspection he found the chimney in bad need of repair. The chimney man would need to come from town and re-mortar the bricks. I did not know how my dad planned to cover this necessary expense and I felt guilty for spending my money on candy and gum.

On the following weekend, Stephen Kendal drove into the yard in his horse-drawn car. It was a common sight to see cars hitched to horses. Many farmers like Stephen, could not afford gasoline.

I stood in the front yard and held my torn shirt closed with my arm.

"Ross! Where's your Dad?"

"With Jimmy. In the barn."

"I need to speak with him right away."

I could tell from Stephen's tone that something was wrong. I had trouble keeping up with his long strides, as he walked to the horse barn.

Dad and Jimmy were busy untangling harness. Dad stopped what he was doing and looked at Stephen. "Hello! What brings you out this morning?"

Stephen looked down at the barn floor and picked up a strand of straw. He twisted the straw around and around his fingers.

“Robert, I need to talk to you in private.” Stephen looked at both Jimmy and me and tossed the straw aside.

Dad said, “Boys, finish with the harnesses.”

Stephen and Dad walked to the barn entrance. I kept an eye on them while untangling harnesses with Jimmy. Stephen had taken off his cap and was looking down at the ground. I saw Dad stagger slightly and Stephen reached out to steady him. In the distance, Morag was standing outside the house, her hands on her hips.

Dad returned to us. Stephen stayed back. “I have hard news. There’s no easy way to tell this. Annie’s not with us anymore. She’s passed away.”

I stared in confusion at Dad.

Jimmy let the harnesses drop to the ground and I heard a sob in his throat.

“She fell this morning, in her room, before breakfast. They think Annie hit her head on the dresser. The doctor’s been called. She’s gone.”

Stephen walked back inside the barn. “Robert, I brought my buggy. I’ll take you over.”

“Boys, I’m going with Stephen. I’ll tell ma’am.”

Dad stopped to tell Morag who went back into the house.

Hours went by before Dad came back with Stephen.

“Ross. Jimmy, come here. I need you to go to Stephen’s house.”

Stephen took the three of us over. The way seemed long as we drove on the road instead of cutting through the fields that were in crop. I did not know what to expect but you did what you were told and nothing was said. I kept my thoughts to myself.

Thora was crying and sitting with the closed casket when we came in. Edna and her brothers were upstairs. When we walked in, Thora stood up and nodded to us, before going to the kitchen

where the neighbour ladies sat. Jimmy and I found a seat on the couch near the casket. I sat as still as I could. It must have been important to Dad to allow Jimmy and me a private moment with our sister before the funeral.

I sat on the couch with Jimmy and Dad, and looked at the oak coffin. The grownups talked in low tones in the kitchen.

“The doctor said it was a heart attack.”

“I thought she fell and hit her head on something.”

“She must have had the attack and then fell.”

“Where did it happen?”

“Upstairs, in her bedroom.”

“Poor sweet thing.”

“A heart attack at her age. Who knew?”

“Too young. She had her whole life ahead of her.”

“Tragic.”

“She’s with her dear mother now and in the arms of Jesus.”

“God rest her soul, and her mother’s.”

“Oh, how I still miss Lydia! And now Annie!”

I had not heard my mother’s name for some time.

Later that night, unable to sleep, I tossed and turned. I recalled picking crocuses for Annie and the day we brought home the Christmas parcel. How her laughter had sounded like tinkling bells as we carried it home! I remembered the dark times when Annie had endured Morag’s humiliations, stinging slaps and the wet tea towel.

When I rose the next morning, I tried to bring Annie’s face to mind, and was troubled her facial features had faded from my memory. She was gone yet I could remember her auburn curls and her tender love for us.

The school closed for Annie’s funeral so all the students could attend. Annie had been well-liked and respected and the news of her passing at age sixteen had sent a resonating bell that had called out the entire community.

Following the burial, we made the short journey to the

community hall where tables had been set up for tea.

I overheard the Kendal women whisper to one another, as they held their saucers and teacups close to their mouths. They were talking about Morag.

“Did you see her? Putting on a show!”

“Crying and sobbing like Annie was one of her own.”

“After how she treated Annie!”

“The nerve.”

“I worry about those boys.”

“I heard that...”

They stopped their whispering when they saw me appear around the table. Irene smiled and offered me a sandwich from her plate.

Although Annie had been away from home for the better part of a year, I had missed my sister. I missed her mothering and sharing confidences. When she left home, a piece of my heart had been ripped from me and now she was lost forever. During the service, I had looked at Dad’s grave face and told myself to act the same. I had suppressed my grief but now the pent up emotions welled from deep inside of me.

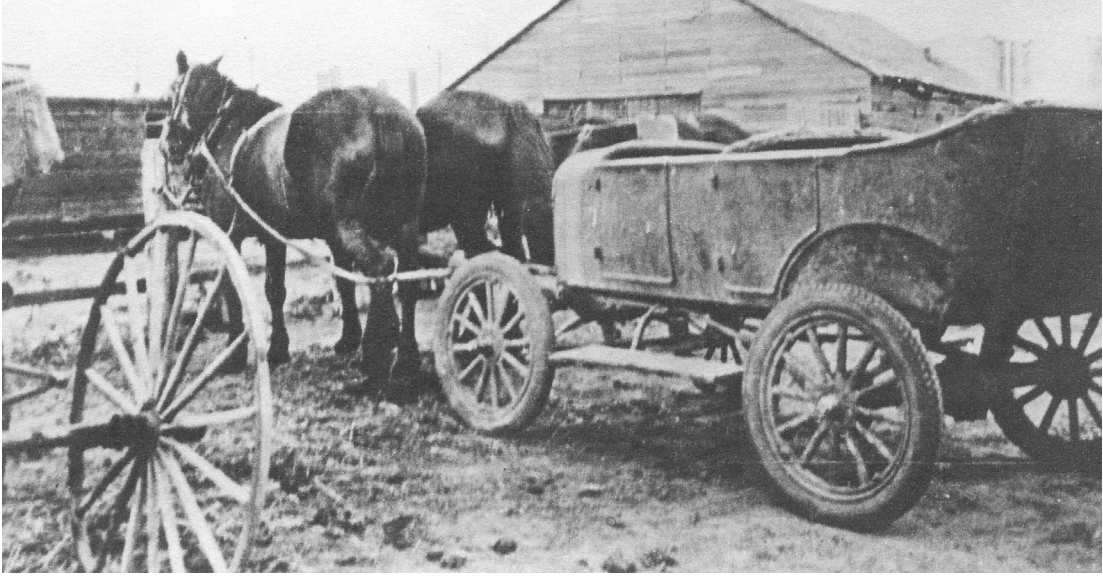
I left the hall to find a quiet place in the side of the road. *To have died after all of that!*

I wept for Annie. I wept for us.

*“I only ask this little spot
In which to write forget me not.”*



Beggars Can't Be Choosers



*Manitoba Archives
Drought 1930's — Bennett Buggy (3) N18332*

School recess found me and my chums out in the field, when I heard my name being called.

“Ross Reid on Relief!”

“Ross Reid on Relief!”

The chant resounded across the baseball field.

“You’re on Relief. You’re poor!”

Am not!

But Dan’s words struck something deep inside me. *Relief?* I did not know what it meant but it sounded like a put down and I was humiliated. I did not know we were on relief until Dan said it. I can only guess that Dan must have heard it from his parents and I was ashamed to find out this way.

Dan always picked on me. His teasing was relentless and the teacher often had to intervene. I think he enjoyed seeing me suffer.

The farm did not seem to be making ends meet. Morag and Dad never discussed money in front of us. I knew there wasn't any unless Dad sold grain or when he helped the municipality with building roads or clearing brush on the road allowance.

Maybe we were on Relief. That would explain Dad's temporary jobs with the municipality. My torn clothing and lack of food started to make sense. It was true then.

Dan continued to taunt me. "Ross Reid on Relief!"

I sprinted toward him.

"Fight! Fight!" The other children called, drawing into a circle around Dan and me as we punched and kicked each other. I was on the attack, defending my dad's honour but when Dan started to get the better part of me, tears streamed down my face. I was older than Dan but he was stronger and bigger. He won the fight.

The teacher did not punish me nor did Morag find out about the fight.

That night, during supper Dad said, "Tomorrow, Jimmy will help me hitch up the team. I'm going to help haul gravel." Dad sounded happy that he had another job with the municipality. It should have been good news but instead it only reminded me of our close association with Relief.

"It's no disgrace t'be poor, but it might as well be."

Kin Hubbard



Pride Has a Cost



Archives of Manitoba
Agriculture — Harvesting 1937 — Threshing (70) N 11771

“Stand back!” Willie Starling shouted at me when I tossed another stack of sheaves into the feeder.

I climbed down from the hayrack.

“Ross, too close! Don’t fall in!” he said.

Willie pointed down into the threshing machine’s feeder and gestured for me to see the exposed knives working furiously back and forth, shredding and ripping through my sheaves. Willie was in charge of the threshing ring these years and ran Dad’s equipment.

“Machinery’s dangerous. See that, Ross!” Willie removed his glove to show me the large gap where his thumb was missing. A few years back, Willie lost his thumb while oiling the sprockets on Dad’s threshing machine. Willie’s gloved hand had caught up

inside some moving parts and I remembered his cries of agony as he left our farm in the back of a wagon, driven to the hospital in the next town.

Willie put his glove back on and I took a step back, atop some of the sheaves that had spilled onto the ground. I lost my footing as the sheaves were slippery and he reached out to prevent me from falling.

Patting my shoulder, he took his glove off and tousled my hair. He then walked me down the breadth of the threshing machine, talking loudly, encouraging me to look through the small openings. I saw how the grain fell through a sieve. The separator divided grain to one side and straw blew out the blower. The cylinder drums rotated the grain across rakes and shakers. Chaff grew into a pile on the ground for use as bedding and feed for livestock. Every so often, a brown ripened fireweed that had mixed in with the sheaves by accident, shot through the threshing machine like a miniature missile, blasting out through the blower, still in one piece.

I think Willie was probably scared for me. It was my first year in the threshing gang and he must have felt responsible, as Dad had entrusted him with my care. By now I was a teenager and small for my age, but I had the enthusiasm to do a man's work.

Willie was in charge of the threshing gang and the men had returned from serving in the war effort for the season. Service men home on leave, gave me a nickel or a copper for helping to pass up the sheaves from the ground to them standing on the hayrack. It was the first time I had earned money and as I did not own a wallet, I kept close track of the nickels and coppers, counting and recounting my coins.

Everyone needed to help. We worked under Willie's direction. People said Willie was "rough around the edges," but I liked him a lot and enjoyed working field after field with clear blue skies overhead that harvest. Willie operated the whistle on

the Case tractor and it was a welcome sound signaling time for the noon lunch or quitting time at evening's end. The whistle had a similar sound to a train. It was a time like no other for a young boy such as me to experience.

"Youse can go help the others," Willie said into my ear. He always said "youse" instead of "you." Carrying my three-tined pitchfork, I left Jimmy's side and walked out to the field to help the men load their hayracks while Jimmy pitched sheaves into the feeder. I think Jimmy wanted to feel as if he was one of the men or maybe he liked working near Dad's threshing machine and tractor. It is difficult to believe that Dad owned such valuable pieces of farm machinery when we were one of the poorest farms in the community.

When Willie picked up Dad's equipment for harvest that year, he asked if Dad could provide a stook team. Jimmy (who had been away helping out at David Meade's farm at the time) and I were up for the task. Willie needed one more team to load stooks left stacked out in tripod style in farmers' fields. Usually a father and son worked together as a stook team but Dad had to stay behind as our crops had matured late and he still had to cut the fields with the binder machine. Willie decided Jimmy and I would help the threshing gang complete the community circuit and return to finish our farm last. We expected to be away from home for close to a month.

Dad must have made arrangements for me to be out of school for harvest. Threshing only occurred during the months of September and October. This was a new experience for me as it meant being away from home for days at a time and sleeping in farmers' barn-lofts.

It felt good to be working with Jimmy again. He had been gone for six weeks to cut wood with our neighbours. A previous arrangement had been made between David Meade and Dad for Jimmy to help to get their wood and ours. At least that was the

story told. Jimmy did bring some wood back home but it did not look like six weeks worth.

Jimmy was home only for a week before the quarrels began again between Dad and Morag. Since Annie's passing, Dad was standing up for us more but Morag constantly whined to him about some new complaint.

Somehow, Jimmy was able to stand up to her and she began to treat him differently. I was surprised to see her treat him with respect; he was becoming more assertive and stood his ground. I did not have it in me somehow. Some people have coping skills; some like me, do not.

Morag seemed to be afraid of Jimmy. He was two years older and bigger and had been away from home already. And when he did return home, it was to help Dad with the farm work, so he wasn't around Morag as much as me. For instance, after disagreements with Jimmy, which inevitably ended with him leaving the house in a hurry, she would pick up his container of rolled cigarettes and go after him, shouting, "Do you want your smokes?" She may have tried to keep him on our farm but in the end, Jimmy returned to live with the Meade family.

The last of the three, I was now the focus of Morag's rage. Although Jimmy had left home, it did not occur to me to leave. Morag made me believe that Jimmy left because of his age. The way she talked it sounded to me he was privileged to leave and it never occurred to me that I could leave home also.

So when Jimmy returned home to help Dad with the harvest, Willie had the idea Jimmy and me should make a stook team. That meant borrowing a horse as Dad could only spare Beth, our twenty-year-old Paint. Dad was still cutting crop and needed a full team of four horses to pull the binder. A neighbour gave us an old white horse with worn down teeth, named Tommy. That horse was thin but he lived to be thirty. I think our neighbour, knowing that Jimmy and I were young and just learning, did not want us to start out with too spirited a horse.

Our team may have looked strange but we managed to do the job picking up dried stooks off farmers' fields and hauling these to the threshing site. Tommy was smart. When you wanted him to pull the load, he held back until Beth began to pull and they worked together. Tommy knew that he should stand still and wait during the unloading, unlike inexperienced horses that started ahead when they heard the pitchfork hit the bottom of the hayrack.

As a new stook team, Tommy and Beth were good for us. The noise from the gas engine on the tractor did not bother them, neither did they shy away from the big spinning pulley on the threshing machine.

Jimmy liked to drive the team, and I stood beside him on the loaded hayrack while we waited in line behind the other teams in front of the threshing machine. When it was time to prompt our team to move along, Jimmy made a "click-click" noise with his tongue against the roof of his mouth. We were at a standstill when the steel wheels dug into the soft ground. Willie, seeing we were having trouble, took Tommy by the bridle and talked into his ear quietly, coaxing and encouraging him to pull ahead. Tommy's head swung up and down and once Beth began to pull, Tommy stepped in with her.

"Too much load, boys. Youse go easy next time," Willie cautioned. We may have been inexperienced at the time but we were learning fast as Willie was a good teacher.

Back home, I imagined our rolling fields transformed into neat rows of stooks, ready for processing in the threshing machine. As I loaded the hayrack, I thought of Dad behind on the farm, working the binder team, while Morag, propped the dropped sheaves into stooks. She was pregnant again and I expected she was having difficulty bending. Willie had said once that Morag reminded him of four matchsticks stuck in a potato and I think he knew she was not good to me.

By nighttime, it was hard to straighten out my arms as my

muscles ached so much and I prayed for rain. I was eager to prove myself and worked hard helping to load the hayracks. My blisters soon turned into calluses.

The days may have been long but I looked forward to the lunches brought to us in the fields and suppers back at the farmhouse. Instead of having my food dished up for me, I was able to help myself to slices of roast chicken and second helpings of mashed potatoes. During one mealtime Willie must have seen me eyeing the two types of savory fruit pies sitting on the sideboard. He cut me a slice from each. The pies were still warm and the filling oozed out, all over my plate. We never had pie at home. I went to bed with a full stomach and every few days we moved on to the next farm to sit down at another farmwife's table. Being away from home was good. I was away from Morag and although I had tired muscles, I felt this must be what it was like to be on vacation.

The night we stayed at Brown's farm was a cold one. The horses were brought into the barn and the gang slept in the hayloft above. Jimmy and I had not brought any blankets with us and all we had were our work clothes to sleep in.

It was common in those days for threshing gangs to share beds together, and Jimmy and I were designated to share with Bill, who had three wool blankets. That year, Bill was the Brown's hired man and I guess he usually slept in the farmhouse, but he must have lost his bed to one of the sons who had come back from the war effort.

Bill was nicknamed "By Jeepers" on account of him always saying that instead of swearing. He was pleasant and nice. Bill wasn't on the gang but he helped as a field pitcher. He was a good worker and Willie had said his help this harvest had made the work at the Brown's farm easier for the threshing gang.

As we huddled underneath the blankets, the men exchanged jokes and told stories.

Willie said, "Youse know, I once met a cowboy who was missing his left ear."

“How’s that?” one of the men asked.

“He was a rodeo cowboy and while he was sleeping in the barn a rat chewed his ear off. It happened right in the middle of the night and he never knew ’til he woke up the next morning.”

I imagined how that cowboy looked without his ear.

A few minutes passed and I saw Willie, who was close to us, reach out and dig into the straw to make a rustling noise.

“Did youse hear that?” he said.

Bill tossed back and forth. He was on the skittish side on account of having for years to watch out for his epileptic father. One harvest, I saw Bill’s father, holding a pitchfork like a weapon, walk toward one of the pitchers, when he went into convulsions and fell to the ground. His body shook and he foamed at the mouth. Someone had called for Bill, who ran to his father’s side. Bill had said hot weather triggered his dad’s fits. When the convulsions stopped, Bill’s father stood up, said he was fine and went straight back to work. He died a few years after that.

The rustling sound stopped. A few minutes passed when I heard more rustling noises.

“Rats,” Willie said.

“By jeeppers!” Bill yelled. He jumped up and grabbed his blankets.

“I’ve had enough of this! Let’s go,” Bill said.

We scrambled after him and the cold night air hit me when we went outdoors.

Bill happened to have a full load on his hayrack and he made a nice bed for us. The sound of laughter from the men echoed through the barn wallboards into the yard.

It was the first time I had slept outside under the stars. By morning the ground was completely white with frost and I knew I would never forget that wondrous sight.

As the youngest members of the threshing gang, Jimmy and I

had the job of rising first to tend to the horses. The gang worked until nine o'clock at night and we were up again at five the next morning to water, feed and harness the horses. Our goal was to be in the field by seven a.m. We were proud to look after all the horses and strived to do our best. Willie looked after his own team and that was fine with us. His horses were jumpy and hard to manage. Willie liked to stop and go quick with his team and I think he was rough with them.

On the weekends the work was cut back. We stopped at noon on Saturdays and never worked on Sundays. Everyone rested, including us, as the gang members took care of their own horses, except Willie who drove his team home for the weekend to check on his farm. Willie's horses were too lively and he did not want to leave them with Jimmy and me. Work resumed again on Monday mornings when Willie returned.

Rising early on weekdays meant leaving the warmth from under the blankets. We lit kerosene lanterns and went about our tasks, feeding and cleaning stalls while the men started to rise. Once we had the horses harnessed and hitched to the wagons in readiness for the day, we sat down to a full breakfast prepared by the farmer's wife.

Three weeks passed and we fell into a routine and worked from sunup to sundown.

The threshing gang moved to the second last farm. Willie pulled Dad's threshing machine with the Case tractor out into the middle of a field where a granary had been set up. Jimmy and I drove our team, and made our way from field to field to pick up stooks to bring to the threshing site. Again, I prepared to go help the other teams load their hayracks while Jimmy fed the sheaves into the threshing machine.

Willie gestured to me to join him and the small crowd of men waiting to unload. The machinery was noisy as it threshed the grain out of the heads of wheat and blew the grain seeds into a standing wagon and the chaff to a straw pile. It was hard to hear him.

“Ross, take a turn with Jimmy and pitch your load,” he said.

Standing nearby, someone teased.

“Nawww, he can’t reach. He’s too short in the ass!”

Willie chuckled. Then he demonstrated how to throw the sheaves, one at a time with a pitchfork into the feeder. I took a few practice tries.

“Hey, how’d you manage to pitch so fast?” one of the men asked.

It was more of a statement and I grinned back at him, stopping long enough to wipe the sweat off my face with my shirt.

“Since Christ was a cowboy!” Willie chirped.

Everyone laughed and someone slapped me on the back. I enjoyed their good-natured teasing. I pitched some more sheaves.

“Keep it up, Ross. An acre and a half feeds a cow and a calf!” a teamster shouted at me.

Willie took hold of my shoulder and said, “Youse worked good Ross. I’ll use youse again next year.” I stood up a little taller and my coins jangled in my pocket. He looked straight in my face and gave me a broad smile before mussing up the hair on my head.

Willie sent me back home with the team. He must have talked Dad into allowing Jimmy to stay on with the threshing ring over the weekend to care for the horses. Jimmy was hardly ever home now. Before I left, Jimmy told me, “Ross, don’t tell her about your money. Hide it.” His advice puzzled me.

Morag was in the front yard when I arrived home with the team and I stepped down out of the wagon to tell her I had earned a dollar and twenty cents from the service men.

“Hand it over,” she said.

I stood there and stared at my shiny nickels and coppers resting in the palm of my hand. It was the first money I had ever earned. Her fingers dug into my skin as she took my money. I was overwhelmed with disappointment and my insides felt empty. I had expected her to say something. I don’t know if Dad had ever

found out about my earnings as I did not tell him.

Jimmy must have known Morag would find out about my money. She seemed to know everything and besides I did not own a wallet or have a private spot in our bedroom, such as a dresser, to store things. I told her partly out of knowing she would find out anyway, but I really told her because I was proud of my earnings. I should have listened to Jimmy.

I can understand now why Morag took the money. I had no place to spend it. I never went to town except for school. She probably used it to buy groceries.

The weekend passed and the threshing gang arrived at our farm with Willie in the lead, pulling our threshing machine from atop Dad's Case tractor with its steel wheels and large cleats. Our farm was the last place for the gang to work that harvest. As before, the stook teams picked up the sheaves and the threshing machine was put to work.

I did not own a pair of gloves and when I pitched a sheaf up into the wagon box, the pitchfork slipped through my bare hands causing the rounded butt end to rub up against the side of my nose. That hurt. I learned not to let the pitchfork slip again. It seemed I always had to learn the hard way. But what injured me more was when I told Willie what happened to my money.

"Youse shouldn't have told her," he said. I looked past him at the threshing machine where it would rest until next harvest. His words rang in my ears, *Shouldn't have told her, shouldn't have told her.*

*"May your friends be many
And your enemies be few
May God be your guide
In what ever you do."*



Seeds of Despair

“If you won’t work in school, you’ll work at home.” Morag’s words opened a new chapter in my life.

True, I had failed school two years in a row but class work was finally starting to make sense. Something had triggered inside me and I decided to get busy and learn. I knew an education was important and I was demonstrating progress. My good memory was helpful. I was also motivated to improve as the other students in my class were now two years younger than me. And I thought I should follow Jimmy’s example as he had gone on to high school. My teacher, like the last one, had given up on calling on me to answer questions. Nor could I read out loud. My stammer had grown worse; I was tired and anxious all the time. But I think my failing school had more to do with me falling asleep at my desk.

Morag had set the milking time for eleven at night so I did not get to bed sometimes until one o’clock in the morning. Then it was up at dawn to do more chores before school. I was exhausted.

It became a habit to fall asleep during class and teacher let me do so most days. Earlier in the year, she shook me awake but that had passed. The other students sitting around me stopped trying to jostle me awake and I spent a lot of school time with my face buried in my arms. The teacher liked to read to us from Robert Louis Stevenson’s “A Child’s Garden of Verses” and the lyrical sounding sentences were sure to guarantee me to nod off. I did my best to stay awake, but more often, it was the end of the school day when I lifted my head off my desk to the sounds of students putting their scribblers away.

I think the teacher tried her best. She may have advocated for

me to get more rest in the evenings. I will never know if the teacher met with Dad and Morag. I took report cards home but never read them. Morag must have convinced Dad that I should be taken out of school to help on the farm. Maybe she had planned it that way.

Morag's prediction that I would work at home was correct as she kept me going from dawn to dusk. When I wasn't working in the yard or barns, she had me busy in the house re-washing the ceilings and walls with Oxydol soap. At first, the ceiling above the stove was so black that all I could do was move the soot around. In time, and with frequent washing, yellow painted boards started to show through.

As I worked at removing the soot, I thought of Mother. Yellow must have been her favorite colour. I imagined her preparing tea for Dad with young Annie standing on a chair, kneading bread in a bowl. Jimmy is close by and reaches to pinch a bit of the dough to sample. I am in my bassinette. The kitchen air is filled with warmth from the stove and Annie's laughter. Dad nods his appreciation when Mother pours his tea. All the important people in my life are pictured in this vignette, set against the backdrop of clean yellow wallboards. *This is my family.*

When Morag caught me daydreaming, she cursed. I needed to return to the well to refill my wash bucket where the soot had left a black film. My hands were blackened also. The cold water from the well made washing difficult but I had to keep at it.

I never stopped and even when I did do a good job, I was made to do it again to keep busy.

Now that I was home all day with Morag, things were getting worse. It seemed I could never do anything right or I was in her way. I could not please her or get her to smile. I felt like an orphaned pauper in my own home. The only times I felt happy were when I was sent to work with Dad in the fields or over to a neighbour to help.

Some jobs I did not mind, and one of these was stacking

clover. We had very little hay on our farm because of dried out sloughs. We needed feed, so Dad cut the clover that grew in the ravines with a sickle mower pulled with two horses. The mower had a five foot blade that shifted back and forth. It required frequent sharpening making mowing a time consuming job.

Amazingly enough, despite no rains, the yellow and white stalks grew four to five feet high. There was enough to make a stack fifteen feet wide, at the bottom, thirty feet long and twenty feet high. I piled it in such a way that it had a good slope. I think I was scared of falling off the top. I made the stack close to the horse barn and the clover came in handy during winter. The animals loved the sweet smelling clover and it helped us get our livestock through winters. Dad was pleased with my clover stack and he thought the slope was a good idea. The warm feeling of praise died in me when Morag walked past and kicked out some of the clover stalks. She said, "You missed a spot."

My apprenticeship had not yet concluded.

Springtime found Dad with the team seeding the grain fields but all this changed on the day of the accident.

A cloud of black flies had spooked one of the horses. When the horse reared up, the seeder box swung and hit dad in the hip. It was fortunate that none of the other three horses in the team had been struck by the seeder box or that the spooked horse had not run away, tangling the entire team up in the whippets and harnesses. That would have been fatal.

Dad was in bed for several days. The hit had been a severe one. He was incapable of finishing the seeding that year, so Jimmy was called home to put in the rest of the crop. Dad couldn't do much of anything but supervise Jimmy's activities. Dad fashioned a long stick into a cane to help him limp around.

One afternoon, Dad hobbled out to the barn to watch me clean seeds for the next day's planting.

“Ross, look at you working away!” Dad’s toothless smile greeted me. He had come to find me and I enjoyed his attention.

Seeds had to be cleaned and treated before being planted in the fields the next day. Dad had taught me how to use our seed grain-cleaning machine. It stood as high as me, about five feet. It had a sieve and a drum with a fan inside that was turned by hand. The machine would blow out any weed seeds, mouse droppings, insects or dirt. Once cleaned, I treated the seeds with a liquid fungicide called Formalin. This helped prevent moldy seedlings. Even with these interventions and labour intensive work, our crops were poor. Perhaps if we could have afforded fertilizer, like everyone else, we may have reaped better crops.

Dad continued to joke and then he grew serious. His recovery had given him time to read up on his newspapers and he told me about the events in Europe. “I sure hope you boys don’t end up in the war,” he said. He had lost two brothers in the Great War. Dad shifted his long stick to poke at some straw on the dirt floor before breaking the tension with a joke. “At least I timed my children in between wars!” One could always count on Dad to turn an awkward situation around. He then went on to talk about the new automation. Tractors were starting to be used in the fields. Rain became more regular. Farmers were doing better.

“I sure do appreciate you boys. I don’t know how we would have managed this season,” Dad added.

“It ... it’s good to have Jimmy home,” I replied.

Dad nodded his agreement. “I’m knackered Ross. Getting hit with the seeder put me down.”

We both fell silent.

“I can’t wait ‘til I’m in a wheelchair and the kids can push me around!” Dad gave me sidelong look, and a bigger grin crossed his face when he added, “But I might end up in the dugout instead!”

By summer’s end, Dad’s hip had recovered and he was back running the farm as before.

When my friend, Gord, found out that I was not returning to school, he decided to quit. I couldn't believe it when he told me later. Gord was two months older than me and we were always in the same grade. His school marks were no better than mine and when I failed a grade, he did too and vice versa. Gord attended two days of school that September and when he found out I wasn't registered, he told his parents he wanted to quit. He never returned to school.

Unlike Gord, I did not have a choice. If Dad had asked me, maybe things would have been different. I really wanted to stay in school. Instead I was destined to work on the farm next to Morag for the rest of my life.

When it was time to make the mail order for new school clothes, Morag did not order any for me. "You won't be going back," she reinforced.

Morag was right; I was a worthless nothing.

*"May your virtues ever shine
Like blossoms on a pumpkin vine."*



A Way Out



I pictured myself walking into the middle of the dugout and becoming submerged.

Bent over at the waist, and crying, I ran for the dugout. My bare feet stumbled over the uneven ground where moles had dug up mounds of fresh dirt. Filled with hopelessness, I ran until I reached the edge of the dugout.

Morag's stinging words, *Joe, you are a worthless nothing* stayed with me. After yet another beating, Morag had ordered me to bucksaw wood, but I chose to run to the dugout instead. I saw no point in anything. *I might as well be dead!* Her beatings were regular and constant now. Time moved slowly with endless chores, little food and few good times. This beating had been another severe

one and I do not know what made me more miserable, my aching backside or the feeling of despair that engulfed me.

I looked into the water again. A light breeze had picked up and rippled the surface. It was the only way out. I pictured myself walking into the middle of the dugout and becoming submerged.

Prairie wolves howled in the distance and I thought of Dad. I looked up across the backfields to see if he was on his way home. It was starting to get dark and clouds were moving in, blocking out the stars. After supper, he had gone to the neighbour's to listen to their radio as ours wasn't working.

Peering out into the night and watching for his lantern, I saw a twinkle off in the horizon. *Dad!* A warm feeling of hope grew inside me but when the twinkle did not grow bigger, I realized it was a lone star sitting low in the sky. Disappointed, I rubbed my eyes to rid the tears that had begun to well up.

I waited, urging Dad homeward, thinking how he would make everything right, but when I looked beyond the backfields, his lantern was still not to be seen. *Nothing.* Holding my thin arms tight around me, I watched the rippling water. It seemed to ease my aching back. I walked over to the edge and slid down into the dugout where the heavy blanket of worthlessness I carried, weighted me down further.

I panicked. Sudden bewildering thoughts about Dad, Jimmy and Morag's children, raced through my head. *Maybe they would miss me.* I could not do it and I scrambled back to the edge.

I sat there for a long time, staring at the water, wanting to finish what I had set out to do, but the courage had died inside me. Pulling at the quack grass, I rolled over, hitting the ground with my fists. *I can't do anything right! I can't even do this!*

I sat on the cold ground and cried. Minutes passed.

Choking back a sob that was rising in my throat, I reluctantly turned back to the house to finish bucksawing my pile of wood. I had to make up for lost time as I had a quota to fill before going to bed.

These days, the only times I felt safe was when Morag went to town for groceries or when she was away in the hospital having another baby. There were days when, for whatever reason, her face bloated and puffed out. During those times her eyes would swell shut and I was relieved she could not see me.

Other times all it took was a look from her to make the terror well up inside me and if I did not get it then, I paid later. She had a hold over me. I hoped punishments would be delivered right away but sometimes she dragged them out. Maybe she hated me because I lacked confidence and could not stand up to her. Or it was because I was small for my age. Whatever it was, her hate for me seemed to give her amusement.

I picked up the saw blade and struggled to keep the green wood in position with one hand to saw with the other. I sobbed under the weight of the harness on my shoulders, knowing I had no choice but to find the strength to pull the load and carry on.

Dad was still not home and I did not know what the next hour would bring. On this dark night, one thing was certain that I would get a cuff across my head once she saw my wet clothes. Hands shaking, I went back to my wood sawing. There was no way out after all.

I was back in the place I needed to be and I was a coward.

"It's often better to be in chains than to be free."

Franz Kafka



Respite

It was hard to sit still when Dad told me the news, that I was going away.

Dad's cousin, Jack Kendal, needed a live-in helper over the winter as his wife, Rose, was going for an extended stay in the city. They were older and did not have children to help them out.

I did not know when Dad and Jack had a chance to discuss it but perhaps it had been decided in the notes I passed back and forth. Throughout the years, I acted as messenger between Dad, our cousins and neighbours.

I liked the responsibility of courier, delivering the handwritten notes written in folded up bits of paper. It made me feel important. I imagined the notes were about getting help in the fields or permission to borrow some item. They could have been about school business as Dad was on the School Board. It never occurred to me, to open and read any of the notes. That was not done.

Jack and Rose lived three miles away but if I walked across the fields the distance was down to one. I kept my wits about me as walking through the last field was risky. Jack's bull liked to chase people.

Their house was warm and inviting. Rose made rag rugs for her floors. The rugs were oblong in length and made from colourful pieces of old clothing. Every time I delivered a note from Dad, Rose insisted I take a break at her kitchen table. I never knew what my reward might be; succulent lemon tarts or liberal portions of warmed apple crisp ladled with fresh cream. Her rag rugs were cozy under my bare feet.

Jack was kind too. He walked with a peg leg. He had lost a leg to blood poisoning following an accident with a steam threshing

machine. Jack had difficulty getting around but he managed well enough. Dad liked to tease Jack who did not believe in removing the horns from his cattle. Dad said that way Jack could hang onto the cows' horns to get him through the high snow drifts. Jack did not mind Dad's good natured teasing. Dad told the story in such a way that it was easy to imagine Jack riding on top of a cow, holding onto a horn with one hand and water pail in the other.

During one particular note delivery, as was the custom, Rose invited me to her kitchen. She passed a delicate looking flowered china plate that held a generous slice of her raspberry cake. The silver fork had a nice feel in my palm and I quickly started into my dessert. Her cake oozed with plump red berries picked from her raspberry patch and the bottom was lightly browned from her oven.

Rose reached over to add several more plump berries swimming in syrup she spooned out of a glass jar. She asked, "Ross, why don't you come and live with us? Better yet, we could adopt you!"

Adopt me? I thought she might be joking. I was pleased she had asked. *What will Dad say?*

"Jack and I would like to have you. Maybe you could ask your father."

I nodded my head.

I went home and waited until Dad was alone and away from Morag who would certainly say no to the idea. When I asked Dad, he wasn't open to the idea. He said he needed me on our farm. I was disappointed but that was the way. Parents decided what was best for you. I am sure, like all of us, Dad had a few flaws, but his love shone through.

So when Dad said I was going to help Jack Kendal that winter, I was excited. By then, Jack and Rose had retired but still had a hobby farm and there were chores to do. Rose was going to spend the winter with her sister who lived in the next town. I was not sure why. Winter storms caused poor road conditions and

made it difficult to get around. Rose and her sister had probably decided to spend the winter together. Since I was out of school, perhaps Dad wanted me to have a new experience. Or maybe Dad knew I needed a break from Morag.

Dad drove me with my possessions, that I carried in a flour sack, over by team. Rose took me upstairs to a bedroom and had me hang up my clothes. Rose was kind and showed me how to open the window, and pointed out the lantern in the room. My bedroom window overlooked the road. Rose said, "Don't be surprised to hear the doctor, who lives up the road, drive by in the middle of the night in his Bombardier! Hope the noise doesn't wake you up!"

Dad and Jack's voices carried up the stairs. They liked to visit and share stories. After Dad left, the three of us sat down to supper. Rose insisted I have seconds. She stayed up late that night to iron clothes and packed her suitcase. I went to bed with real sheets and a pillow. I thought I was on a wonderful holiday.

The next morning, it was decided that I should come along with them to the train.

As we traveled in Jack's Model "A" Ford, Rose called out last minute instructions to me such as where to find the laundry soap for washing and which pail to use for slop. She suddenly pointed to smoke in the sky, "Someone's haystack burnt." It was common for spontaneous fires to occur in piles of green hay. Jack grunted. It didn't sound as if he agreed. I thought she might be right about the haystack.

Rose must have been excited as she continued to make small talk. As we drew closer to the town we saw a sizable farm situated close to the road. The yard looked tidy and neat. Rose said, "Look at that nice hip roof barn."

Jack answered in a gruff voice, "That is not a hip roof barn." I heard the tension in Jack's voice.

No other comment was made and I thought it odd that they

would argue over such a minor thing, especially when they were going to be apart for the next five months.

We arrived in town and Jack drove up to the station.

“We’re here,” Rose said. “I promise to write. Goodbye Jack. Ross, take care of him for me.”

I waved my affirmation.

“I promise to read them,” Jack said.

“What’s that?”

“Your letters.”

“Good then. Well, goodbye.”

After this brief exchange, Jack and I drove onto the store to pick up a few groceries before turning for home.

Upon arrival, we busied ourselves with the chores. Jack had a nice quiet team of horses very suited to his needs, a hay rack and stone boat, three cows (one milking) and a few laying hens. His barn was a good size and it had been built into the bank of the ravine, allowing one to drive the team right up into it. That way, it was easy to unload the hayrack into the loft. Then all I had to do was push the feed through a hole in the loft to the animals down below. He trained me on the rest of the chores and I was a quick learner.

The next day we both put up the storm windows on the house, it was the first time that I had been up a ladder on a two-story house and I found it a little high but I was able to carry the windows up. I was scared that I would drop the window on the way up, but I didn’t. Jack stood in the house, on the window side and reached to me, to help lift the window into place. Back home, we did not have storm windows. I thought the three little fresh air holes in the bottom that one could close off with the attached hinged slat of wood, was a good idea.

By the next day, I was able to do all the chores and milked the one cow, cleaned the barn and hauled in the feed. Jack prepared all the meals including desserts. There seemed to be a lot of servings of Jell-O pudding that winter but it was all right and

likely what he could afford. Rose had left a jar of her homemade cookies that we enjoyed with steaming cups of Ovaltine. She also left preserves of chokecherry jelly that went well with the bread Jack baked.

In the evenings, Jack brought out his cribbage board. As my adding was very poor, Jack taught me how to add to a higher standard. He was patient with me.

Jack was not all that well and he had an ulcerative stomach that required him to take a spoonful of white powder he stirred into water. I worried about him when his stomach acted up. I could see how distressed this made him.

After the first few days, when Jack had taught me what to do, he did not return to the barn. It had not yet snowed when we took Rose to the train but once the snow blew, he could not get around. If he fell down, there was no way he could get back up on his own. He did not use a cane and he took his wooden leg off when he went to bed. I never heard him complain about his leg.

That was likely the main reason why he needed me to stay with him until Rose returned. For safety. He could not live alone.

Families and neighbours helped one another, then again I wonder if Dad placed me out to give me a break from Morag. Those few months were the best during my young life until Rose came back from the city. Then it was time for me to return home.

*“A faithful friend is hard to find
But, when you have one, bear in mind
As I shall, when I think of you
Being a lasting friend, both kind and true.”*



Baby Gregg

Morag's little one was crying all the time now. Over the last ten days his reddened and swollen lip had changed to a miserable looking purple mass. He was not the same cheerful baby when Morag had brought him home from the hospital and Dad had hoisted him up into the air saying, "He will win the war for Churchill!"

His cries were distressing and intense. His face looked hot and tears ran continually down his cheeks. He was in obvious discomfort and I will never know if he had picked up an infection from the numerous houseflies, or if the problem arose when he started cutting teeth.

Morag tried her homemade remedies but nothing had worked. Gregg was crying non-stop and all Morag could do was to hold him on her lap and try to console him. When he started to wheeze, I worried that his throat had swollen shut. It was heart wrenching. Dad hitched the team to take him to the hospital. The sounds of Gregg's cries floated in the air as they journeyed down the road.

"He's in the hospital." That was all Dad said when he returned home hours later. A hospital stay meant Gregg would be treated and looked after by the doctor and nurses. He was in good hands.

The next night, David Meade came over in his car to drive Dad the six miles to the hospital. David did those things for others and he liked to drive. I imagine Dad paid the gas. The Family Allowance had started coming and money was not so scarce.

"It won't be long now," Dad said after returning from another evening of visiting Gregg and Morag. My prayers had

paid off. Gregg was recovering. *Gregg's coming home soon!*

As before, David drove Dad to the hospital and when they returned, I saw that Morag's arms were empty. I had misunderstood Dad.

Nothing was said about Gregg's passing. A few days later, David came over to drive Dad and Morag to Gregg's funeral but before they left the yard, I heard Morag say, "Wait." She walked over to her flower garden and picked a large bouquet of Baby's Breath. David and Dad stayed in the car and when Morag stepped inside with her flowers, I assembled her little ones together. We watched as they drove away and saw how the billowing cloud of Baby's Breath had filled the interior of the car.

*"May your life be one season of love
'till the angels whisper your home is above."*



Exile

A year or more had passed since Morag had ordered me home from school. Since Jimmy was living away on the Meade Farm, I was considered the oldest child. I could feel myself becoming more responsible and enjoyed being in charge of the horses and numerous chores. As I went about my chores, I thought about what Jimmy was doing right now, working as a hired man. At least he did not have to live under Morag's thumb. She controlled my activities and I followed her orders. She treated me like an indentured servant and I did not know when I would be freed.

Sixteen-years old and small for my age, Morag was still beating me. I could not stand up to her the way Jimmy could. She had a power over me. To keep the peace, I did the work as she asked, but even with her checking on me, she often blamed me saying I did things when I had not. Dad came to my defense often and I always felt safer when he was around.

Two weeks before, as I was on my way to the barn to milk cows, Dad took me aside. He must have been waiting for me and it was a rare moment as Dad was always working in the fields and we never had time to ourselves.

"She still thrashing you?"

"Yes."

I was surprised that he knew. Morag never beat me in front of anyone or outside in the yard. Beatings were daily and took place in the house, when we were alone. I had learned to endure her punishment in silence when she smothered my screams with her hand. I did not think he knew yet all this time he had known. I wanted to say more but we never talked much nor did I ask questions. I never started conversations with Dad and years of not

asking questions prevented me from asking him now. I only know he was kind and tried his best to protect me yet I wondered why he allowed it.

“Son, one of these days she’s going to kill you.”

Shocked, I swung my head up to glance at Dad’s stoic face. His eyes were half-closed against the reflection of the last rays of sun on the snow-covered ground. His face had a determined look I had not seen before.

“Ross, promise me if she starts in on you and I’m not home, run out of the yard. Understand?”

I made a vow that I would.

I nodded. It was like a bell had gone off inside my head. A grand revelation where everything I knew and heard about Morag clicked into place. I recalled the calf she had choked to death and the emotional hold she had on me. I thought about Annie’s leaving and Jimmy’s leaving. I thought about the time I had tried to do away with myself. I was the last of the three and now it made sense to be prepared.

Up till now, I was like a cowered dog having a master who abuses it over and over again, yet the animal will not run away.

It felt as though that was all about to change.

March arrived and the water barrels needed refilling for washing. The well had dried up again. I hitched the team to the stone boat and drove to the dugout where an underground spring had kept us in water all winter. It meant chopping a hole in the ice wide enough to immerse the pails. It was a monotonous job, climbing up and down the side of the dugout with water sloshing out of the pails to fill the barrels. Once I finished, I drove the team back up to the house and passed by Morag standing next to the cow barn.

I did not realize she had been outside, watching. She waved her arms up and down, shouting and pointing at me. Spittle ran

down her chin as curse words tumbled out of her mouth. Bewildered, I looked behind me, in the direction of her mad gestures to see what was wrong. The flat steel runners on the stone boat had picked up clumps of straw, leaving a noticeable trail up to the house.

“You bugger, spreading straw all around!” Morag spat. I froze. She had a demonic look in her eyes and raw anger in her face. She walked abruptly to the stone boat to reach for the axe, and held it with a menacing action over her head. She screamed, “You son of a bitch!”

One of these days she’s going to kill you.

I heard a bell in the distance ring out a warning. *This is it.* I dropped the reins and ran out the yard gate and into the road. I was filled with dread and hid in the bushes.

I had no other plan and I stayed there, miserable and cold, watching the shadows fall across the fields of white snow. Stamping my feet to keep warm, I stayed there to wait for Dad. The leather on my outer mittens had stiffened from scooping the water earlier into the barrels. I heard the back door of the house slam and Morag’s yelling intermingling with Dad’s loud words. Minutes later, he walked out to the road.

“Ross! Ross!”

Thoughts of Annie and Jimmy, of their last days on the farm came to mind and I wondered if they had experienced any of the emotions I was feeling now.

“Ross! Ross!”

I was petrified to move until he called out again. I left my haven and stepped out of the bushes. We stood on the road as I told him what happened.

“Go to Starlings,” he said. “You don’t need to come back. I’ll see you later.”

Relief flooded through me. I was never going to have to live in constant dread again. No more humiliations, no more beatings.

No more Morag! I had reached a turning point in my life, and although exhausted with fear, I was ready to walk on a new path. Every day living with Morag had been hell. It was exciting yet at the same time worrisome, not knowing what the future held for me. Our farm was all I knew of the world and, though I did not want to leave Morag's little ones, it was impossible for me to live at home. It had been the longest day of my life, yet the best.

Dad sounded heartbroken as he told Willie and Jane what had happened. Jane made sympathetic sounds, as she hung up my wet mittens and felt boot liners by the woodstove. She made a pot of tea. As I drank the tea, my hands shook while Dad told the story. I felt embarrassed.

"Mad as a hornet she was. Cursing blue murder at Ross. I don't know why she acts like that." Dad did not know himself why Morag went into rages. Then he explained it away, "Maybe she had a hard upbringing."

He knows it's not my fault!

Dad had not blamed me. I had done the right thing and my embarrassment melted away. Willie and Dad left for the farm to retrieve my clothes and after Willie returned, he and Jane talked quietly, making plans for me to stay with them and return to school. Jane patted me softly and gave me a hug and Willie rumbled my hair before I turned in for the night. I tried not to think how long I would be able to stay with the Starlings but at least for now, I was safe.

I decided I would do my best and work hard. Willie and Jane did not treat me like a hired man but I took on the role of one. That's what I thought of myself.

Willie and Jane had a two bedroom house and multiple beds were set up in each room to accommodate the family. Their daughter, Lorraine, stayed with them on a cot and their oldest son, Bryan (he was married by this time) and his wife slept in the

second bedroom. Willie's other sons were away as they had enlisted in the war effort.

Jane decided a bed should be set up for me in Bryan's bedroom. I do not know what Bryan and his wife thought of that, but it was better sleeping in their bedroom than bunking in the barn. Whenever Willie's sons came home on leave, I ended up in the barn with them to listen to army stories far into the night.

Each night, Jane liked to sing, "Sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite! But if they do, hit them with a shoe 'til they're black and blue!" I had not heard the ditty before. She was cheerful and I did not have the heart to tell her that it only reminded me of the putrid smell of the bedbugs we had at home. I am sure she would not have sung the rhyming words if she knew. Certainly there were no bedbugs in Jane's house.

For the first couple of mornings, Willie, who was the first one up called me awake. "Ross! Time to rise and shine!"

I bolted upright in bed. I think I may have yelped or screamed. The terror I carried inside of me had spilled over and now Willie knew. I was filled with panic at what he might say.

Willie looked concerned. "Ross! Simmer down, it's alright now."

He tried his best to bring me around. Willie and Jane were kind to me, and gradually I settled down enough to stop feeling on edge all the time. Working on their farm helped.

Willie had a good-sized healthy herd. I helped to milk all thirteen cows by hand and process the milk through Jane's cream separator. There was plenty of milk for all of us, including the pigs and calves, and Willie and Bryan slaughtered a pig or cow when needed so there was meat on the table at every meal. The Starlings were accomplished farmers and I was never hungry.

Willie liked his beer and occasionally visited the beer parlors in neighbouring towns. Whenever Willie did not return, Jane left to retrieve him and some nights she must have had a time getting

him back home. Their cows were used to being milked at six o'clock, before our supper, so I would get a start on the milking. I liked to help and when you are young you want to prove to others that you can do things and I was no different. If that's being a show off, I guess I was, and Jane was appreciative.

Jane and I were herding the milking cows to pasture for the day. One of the cows scratched her ear with a hind foot. Jane sang out, "When a cow tries to scratch her ear, it means a shower is very near!"

She looked up at the sky and I sensed her worry. We needed rain. She walked away a few steps and brushed away a tear. I think it had something to do with having to bring Willie back home the night before.

She turned to me. "Ross, how would you like to take the eggs and cream out this time?"

It meant carting this week's eggs and cream in the wagon, and meeting the Creamery driver at the corner of the road. Eggs and cream were picked up once a week and the driver issued a "cream cheque" to cover the previous week's sale. Jane was entrusting me to carry out the farm produce and bring back the cream cheque.

I stood high, proud to take on this extra responsibility. And once I had proven myself, Jane gave me the job again and again.

While living at the Starlings I gained a lot of riding experience. They always rode a horse or pony bareback. Until moving to their place, I had hardly ever ridden. Dad worried about one of us being thrown off a horse and having to pay hospital bills. He also did not want us to "play out" a horse, as they were needed for work. Willie, however, owned many more horses and ponies than we ever did. I usually took Bess, the largest pony with grey and white markings on her face. She was easy to ride. Sometimes I took Nettie, the Pinto pony instead.

I was preparing to take Nettie with me to ride out to the pasture when I spotted a hen laying an egg on a clump of straw in the yard. Hens liked to go to the same place each day and lay an egg. It was great fun to place my hand under a trusting hen and catch her egg before she tried to sit on it. I decided to check for other eggs, and found a pail and gathered up what I could find. I set the pail on top of a fence post. I would ride Nettie back to the house and bring the pail of eggs with me before going off to the pasture.

I walked back to Nettie, climbed up onto her back and we rode past the fence post. I leaned out and grabbed the pail of eggs. The motion caused the eggs to rattle and Nettie alarmed by the noise, shied sideways. It was all I could do to stay on her back. Lorraine, who had come out to the yard, ran towards us and I passed the pail of broken eggs to her.

Regaining control of Nettie, I looked down at Lorraine who was laughing her head off.

I worried what Jane would say but she did not get mad. No one there ever did. I was learning that problems did not have to turn into major catastrophes. Regardless, I was careful with the eggs after that.

Outside of my own yard and school, I knew nothing about the world, so living with Willie and Jane allowed me new experiences, including the time I went to the horse races.

“Ross, come with us and see the races,” he said. “See the horses run hell bent for leather.” Willie loved horse racing. He and Jane often went to stay overnight with their friends in the city to watch the races. They were always after me to go with them and finally I consented, even though I did not want to. I was too scared and shy about meeting people, and did not want to leave the farm. I was still stuttering and did not feel comfortable meeting strangers. The farm was my refuge.

All that week Willie talked about the race track and what we

would see and hear there. He was really looking forward to it.

The day arrived and Willie drove us to the city to their friends' place. I think Willie was surprised when I refused to go into the house, choosing to sit in his car instead. Jane came out and then Willie tried to coax me inside the house but I wouldn't budge. Willie brought something out for me to eat and later he carried out a couple of blankets so that I could sleep in the car. Although it was a cool night, I was happy to be left alone. I was less afraid of staying in the car all night than meeting their friends. I did not care if anyone thought I was odd.

The next day I did go to the race track with them and had a look around. I did not share Willie's enthusiasm for horse racing. When I became tired of standing around, I returned to the car until it was time to go home.

That was the first and last time Willie took me to the races.

"Don't let the door hit your ass on the way out!" Willie said in an affectionate tone unlike Morag who would have said it in an abrupt manner, emphasized with a swift kick.

Life with the Starlings had fallen into a comfortable routine. For the last couple of weeks, it had become my job to herd the milking cows back and forth to pasture on the road allowance. It meant passing my former home twice a day. I still feared facing the boogeyman. By now, she must have known when the cows were expected to clamor across the wooden bridge by the ravine and have seen me atop Bess. Thankfully I had not come across her, yet.

A few days later, I was given an extra errand. Jane wanted me to go to town. "Ross, are you alright with that?" She must have known I had trouble passing the old place but maybe she wanted me to get over my fear of Morag. I could have refused, and Jane would not have disputed it; she could send Bryan instead. I accepted the errand and chose to take Nettie.

I brought Nettie up to the top of the hill and saw the roof of

my former home down below. I wondered who must have ended up having to transfer the water from the stone boat inside the house that last day. Morag's children had been too small to do it. I hoped Dad had not ended up with the task.

The sun streamed through a patch of grey colored clouds and an exhilarating feeling came over me. I tugged my cap tight on my head and urged Nettie to gallop down the hill. The noise from her clattering feet on the dirt road pounded in my chest. Morag was standing in the yard. A bubble of euphoria grew inside me, ready to burst.

"Yipppeeel!" I yelled and the pain of childhood hurts emptied out of my lungs and the wind dried the tears streaming down my face. Once we had passed, I slowed Nettie to a trot and reached down and hugged her. I was overjoyed that the three of us, Annie, Jimmy and me had escaped Morag's overpowering oppression.

The harness I carried around my heart had broken and finally I was free.

Willie suggested I start to learn how to handle field implements. As I was comfortable with Bess and Nettie, he showed me how to hitch the ponies up to the harrow and drag this over the Russian thistles growing in the pasture. The harrow pulled the thistles out of the ground and I used a pitchfork to roll the dried out tumbleweeds into piles. Willie checked on me from time to time and left me to work on my own. When the thistles were all piled, I returned Bess and Nettie to the barn where Willie was waiting for me.

"Ross, I'll come with youse," he said. Thistles were a nuisance and needed to be disposed of. I had planned to return to the pasture and light the piles.

"Let me rest my dogs." Willie leaned against a pile of boulders and pulled his shoes off to rub his feet. His hair had

become salt and pepper coloured, a reminder that he was getting on in years.

“I just come back from your dad’s place.” I looked sideways at Willie and wondered what was up. For the last few weeks, he had been trying to convince me to return to school. Willie had suggested I go to a different school, not with my half-brothers and half-sisters. When he first broached the subject, I shook my head and worked even harder for him; I was fearful he would make me return to school. My stuttering had not gone away and if I had to speak, I reworded my sentences. Most of the time, I stayed silent and kept my thoughts to myself. I had missed an entire year and had already been two years behind the rest of my class, when Morag took me out. I could not see myself standing up in a classroom with younger peers, stuttering out answers to teacher’s questions. A grade six education was my limit.

I steeled myself to counter Willie’s coaxing. I hoped Dad had not told Willie to try to convince me to return to school. I could feel my stutter coming on, ready to block my words of protest.

Willie said, “Ross stop what youse doing there. I needs to talk to youse. I want youse in the threshing gang this year. And I think youse should represent your dad’s farm this harvest. Youse did well with Jimmy before. Pick out your horses and use one of my hayracks.” *My own stook team!*

“Ross, well? What do youse think?”

I nodded my agreement. I was pleased to have a new responsibility and thankful he had given up on returning me to school. He started to turn away when he said, “Ross! Stop working so hard. Youse never get all the work done before youse die!”

I grinned at Willie again, and struck a match near the next thistle pile. It lit quick and burned up like a dried spruce tree. We stood back to watch the dying embers.

“So don’t work so hard!” Willie slapped me on the back and turned back to the barn.

“Alright boss!” I answered. After that, I worked even harder, but Willie did keep a friendly eye out for me.

I imagined myself in charge of my own stook team, working in the gang with the other stook teams, and meeting up again with Jimmy, who was working for Meades. My status had changed and it felt good.

Willie came through and I had my own stook team; two field horses that liked to pull heavy loads. After some practise, I learned how to guide the team in between the rows of stooks. The “teamsters” walked alongside to throw up sheaves into the hayrack. When the hayrack was full, I transported these to the threshing machine and helped unload to the “pitchers” standing below.

The teamsters liked to play practical jokes. During one rest period, someone tied a logging chain to lock up the wheels on a stook team. When it was time for the team to move their rack, the horses couldn’t pull it and came to an abrupt standstill. The driver had no idea until the men started to laugh. It was a huge joke, but come to think of it now, it could not have been amusing for the stook team. Willie enjoyed a joke too but he curbed the fun. After all it was harvest time and there was too much to do in too little time.

At David Meade’s farm, when the metal separator in Dad’s threshing machine turned red, Willie halted production. It was a sure sign that the crop was rusty. Cows and horses will not eat much of it, unless they are starving. Although oat straw is the best feed for cattle, it was not rust resistant. During the drought years though, famished cattle will eat pretty much anything and I do not think rusty oat straw was harmful nor did we mind our hands turning red from handling it. Maybe that’s why Dad grew rye instead of oat straw. Wheat and barley straw did not turn rust-coloured like oat straw.

Willie sent me and the team to work in David’s next field of barley. When I came back to the threshing site with another load

of sheaves, David took me aside.

“The war won’t last forever and Willie’s boys, God willing, will return home and be back on the farm. You will need to look for a place. When the time comes, how would you like to come and stay with us?”

“Yes,” I replied. I had not considered what the future held for me and I liked David and his wife, Cora, well enough. Plus Jimmy was still working for David.

“Then it’s a deal!” David said.

It was my first gentlemen’s handshake.

Day after day went on, with me working the stook team, making the circuit of local farms, enjoying three squares and bedding down in barns. As with the previous year, the threshing gang’s last stop was at Dad’s place.

I stayed clear of Morag by working in the fields, and instead of staying over I chose to return with Willie and Bryan to their house. When the last stook was picked up, Willie told me to retire the stook team and help shovel grain into Dad’s auger. Willie told me not to worry about Morag who was too busy in the kitchen. “I asked her to make some of those world famous biscuits of hers to go with our lunch.” He winked at me.

Willie was a good manager, delegating and keeping everyone on one job or another.

The auger had been swung out from the threshing machine and angled inside Dad’s granary. I shoveled the grain away to keep the auger clear and gradually the grain was transferred. Standing on top of the grain, I was slowly elevated to the top and every so often I had to catch a breath of fresh air at the granary’s open shunt. It was dark inside from all the thick dust and soon I was covered in it. It was hot and sweaty work.

When that was done, Dad as always, asked Willie to arrange the threshing machine to blow the straw chaff on top of his barn.

It was a good idea as it kept the barn warm during winter and it was handy as one did not need to go far to retrieve bedding straw. However the wind had to be in the right direction, otherwise it could not be done the way Dad wanted. This day, the wind was blowing the right way, and Dad stood beside me to rest his arm on my shoulder and I could tell from the expression on his face that he was pleased.

The following spring, on a crisp day in April, Willie walked into the barn where I was feeding the horses. He looked serious. "Ross, I have some hard news from your maw." *Morag must have sent a message over with one of her kids.* "I don't know how to say this." He paused.

I had a sense his news had something to do with my dad. Dad had been admitted to hospital for stomach aches, and it turned out he had appendicitis. An operation was needed.

"Your dad's passed on."

No!

"It happened this morning. He had his operation yesterday. He got up out of bed and was joking and teasing the nurses, when he folded up and collapsed on the floor. It was sudden." Willie paused and said, "Morag says it was a heart attack. I'm so sorry, Ross."

I regretted I had not gone to see Dad in the hospital but it was miles away, too far to travel by pony. I don't recall hearing if anyone had visited him, including Morag. No one had suspected Dad wasn't coming back. It was supposed to be a routine operation.

I managed to stammer, "Does Jimmy know?"

"Yes, I went over to Meades to tell him first. I thought that was proper," he said. I nodded. Jimmy was the oldest and it made sense that he would be told first.

It hit me hard. I had not seen much of Dad since harvest. For the next few days I went about my chores in a state of disbelief, hoping to hear that there had been a mistake. *Maybe Dad will*

wake up and there won't be any funeral. I had been living with the Starlings for over a year now. I was still a teenager and felt lost and alone in the world. My family was disappearing; first my mother when I was a baby, then my sister three years ago and now my Dad. Forced out of my home, I only had Jimmy now, yet circumstances were such that we had been living apart these past two years when he moved to David Meade's. *I'm an orphan!*

Even though I had gone through the recent experience of baby Gregg's death, I wasn't all that capable of handling or thinking that death was permanent. I was too young and could not bear to think that Dad was not coming back. *It can't be true!*

Willie and Jane took me to the city to get fitted for a suit. I had never owned one, I think I must have worn a tie and belt sent at Christmas by Uncle John. They also purchased a pair of black dress shoes and white shirt to go with the striped suit. I felt out of place wearing a suit but Willie and Jane wanted me to look good, so I went along with it all. They were good neighbours and as much as I appreciated them for taking me into their home, they were not my family. I was missing Dad, terribly.

On the day of the funeral, I met Jimmy on the front steps of the church. He acknowledged me with a nod of his head and I nodded back. It had been some time since I had seen him. We went inside and I looked around the church. My ears were ringing and my palms became sweaty as I anxiously searched the pews for Morag. Even though I knew she couldn't do anything to me, I trembled when she saw me. Then Willie motioned me to sit with him, Jane and their family. Jimmy sat with the Meades.

When I passed the open casket I did not look inside. I wanted to remember Dad as I had seen him last. When his casket was lowered into the ground next to Mother's grave, I wanted to run out of the cemetery. After the interment, I found my way back to Starlings' Farm. If there was a lunch in the hall, I chose not to stay for it. I needed to grieve for my father on my own and settle

the pangs of loneliness deep inside my chest.

I still could not believe he was gone. I had not realized that Dad had other debilitating health issues including back problems. I do not think he ever completely recovered from the seeder accident either. Dad always said he had only one lung and that his move to Canada, to live in a drier climate, was a necessity. But in later years Uncle John said that wasn't true. Other relatives have disputed my dad's health problems too and I ponder why he left England in the first place. Dad did like to kid around, so I do not know if he had one lung or two. What I do know is my dad was all heart and when that gave out, he passed from this life into the next.

*“When on this page you cast your eye
Recall to mind the days gone by
Forget my faults and drop a tear
And think of me when no more here.”*



Broken Promises

Now that the war was over and Willie's boys had returned home, I thought about the promise I had made to David Meade. Willie wanted me to stay with one of his relatives to help as a farmhand but I had already said I planned to work for Meades. David and Cora had two daughters and one son, younger than me. It seemed natural to move onto David's farm to be with Jimmy. Besides, I had never met Willie's relative, and I felt that David needed my help more.

David and Cora had a large five bedroom farmhouse. I stayed upstairs in Jimmy's bedroom, and Cora arranged another bed with a real mattress for me. David and Cora's bedroom was on the main floor. Their children each had their own bedroom upstairs. There was plenty of space and I was thankful to have a roof over my head and not to have to sleep in the barn like a hired man.

Although they made Jimmy and I feel like part of their family, and included us in family events and celebrations, this lasted until visitors came over. Generally we had our meals together but when visitors came over, Jimmy and I went upstairs with our plates. I can understand why the distinction was made. After all we were not blood connected. Being with Jimmy made me feel less of an orphan, yet when I saw the strong bond between the siblings, it made me feel empty, a reminder of what I had lost. They celebrated birthdays and I recall Cora asking about ours, but we just shook our heads and changed the subject. All the same, the family treated us well and my time with them on Meade Farm was enjoyable.

Most times, helping on the farm did not seem like work. I mucked out barns and hauled wood, working by Jimmy's side, as in former times. When I wasn't working with Jimmy or David, I helped David's son who was as tall as me, but four years younger.

Farming was looking up. The war had ended and the rains had returned. It was farewell to a decade of drought. Farmers were

raising regular crops and those who could afford tractors and other machinery enjoyed greater yields. People were happier, and I wished Dad had lived long enough to have seen the improvements. Poor farms, like David's worked with horses still. He did not own a tractor nor have the necessary machinery to work the fields after each harvest. The Meade Farm was not prosperous and David's money came from what he earned from driving the school van. They were poor, but they managed better than Dad and Morag ever had and there was plenty to eat.

David reserved two cows from the herd for table milk and I looked after milking them. One of the cows was real trouble. She was always on the run, causing me to go after her on foot. David teased me about that cow because she ran from me whenever she saw me coming. I tried to befriend her but she had a mind of her own. If I wanted her to move in one direction, she took the other. All my coaxing did not improve things with that cow and David just laughed.

Moving to David's place broadened my experience. When David needed to slaughter a pig, Jimmy and I helped. We caught the pig by running after it, turning it on its back and held the squealing animal steady while David stabbed it in the throat with a sharp knife. Blood came shooting out of it and David would say, "Let go!" and we let the squirming pig stand back up. The pig still had strength in its legs to stand and twitch. Once it was dead we hung the body on a derrick so the blood could drain out. It was very important to get the blood drained out right away. Then boiling water was poured over the body to soften the hair particles before scraping the hide with a sharp knife. David cut the stomach and removed the innards, and these were tossed into the yard for the hens. He butchered the pig into pieces and I helped to rub red-colored salt into the meat before taking it to someone to be smoked. I was astounded that the pieces did not have to be cooked first; salt and smoke cured it. In a couple of weeks, the pieces were returned for the table. That's farming.

David was even more skilled with horses than Willie. He

had twenty horses in total. No wonder he needed my help. His horses were set up on different teams and he gave me the opportunity to learn how to handle them all.

I did not remember all their names but Lady, Maude and Mae were the main ones. Five horses were needed on the plow, and we were always sure to put the strongest one on the outside or switch horses around to share the work. The lead horse on a plow had the hardest job because she had to walk on the tilled area, and it must have taken some effort to step through the fresh turned-over soil. The second horse in line walked in the furrow, and the remaining three, trailed to the left.

Even more impressive was to see eight horses pulling the tandem disc. It took two of us to hitch each horse to the heavy whippletrees made up of leader-bars and linkages that balanced the pull to ensure each animal took equal weight. Once the whippletrees were joined together and the animals hitched up, eight horses stood at the ready, in a single row.

I must have shown a keen interest because David chose to teach me how to handle this team. Under his careful guidance, I learned how to work the eight horses. Natural ability may have helped too. With the reins in my hands, I admired the nags; they loved to pull heavy loads. The team and I fell into a rhythm and followed my commands “Geel!” for left turns, “Haw” for right turns, “Whoa” for stop and “Giddy up!” for go. The horses responded and they liked to work as much as I did.

To get the fields ready for seeding, we used eighteen horses in total on various pieces of farm equipment. David used four on the seeder, Jimmy had six on the cultivator and I used eight on the tandem disc. We had to change the horses with spare ones to prevent their shoulders from getting raw from pulling equipment, as two horses were needed for the school van.

David assigned me to my own team for smaller jobs, such as hauling wood with the wagon and moving rock with his stone boat.

The beige horse was named Mark, and the black one, Magic. They were experienced, tall and big, and I was proud of them. I learned that if you gave your team a few oats they would speed up so I used to sneak grain to them. And I brushed them two and three times a day until their coats were shiny. You could always tell if a horse was well-fed and cared for by its shape; rounded out with no bones sticking out.

David did not always have enough feed in the barn, so we turned some of the horses out into the pasture overnight. It was a daily routine to wake up at sunrise, eat breakfast and walk out to retrieve the horses. They were watered at the trough and harnessed, ready to start in the fields by seven o'clock in the morning.

Horses were worked until noon and then returned to the barn where they were unhitched to be fed and watered. Then after a rest over the noon hour, we hitched them up again and worked in the fields until six in the evening. The Meade Farm was a true working family farm.

David trained the younger ones by placing them in between more experienced horses. Horses get trained, by going over and over, round and round in the fields. It was necessary as horses spook, and blinkers cannot always control them. For instance if a plow hit an imbedded rock, the blade jumped up as we moved at a pretty good clip and the harness would break. Experienced horses were less easy to spook. They were used to things happening and stayed settled. I guess you could say they were good role models for the younger horses.

I never found the work monotonous. I loved working with horses, especially out in the fields. I dealt with anything that came our way, including ground wasps. When we ran over a nest buried in the ground, the insects flew up and stung the horses inside their legs and bellies, where the skin is thin and vulnerable. The team's instinct was to run, but I calmed them down and soothed the tender spots with mud to help ease their discomfort.

Horses were more than just work animals. After returning

them to the pasture, they snorted and rolled in the dust, free of their heavy harnesses. Watching the colts run to their mothers, pulled at something inside me and I sensed the closeness they shared. Horses were important and I did what I could to help them out.

Then there was the time with the badger.

While crossing a field with the team and wagon, a badger came into my line of vision. Badgers like to run low to the ground and hunt gophers and mice. Unfortunately, badgers were a menace as they made their burrows into the ground underneath the wolf willows or “badger bushes” as we called them. Badger bushes grew in clumps about three feet high and provided dense cover on the prairies.

When I sighted the badger, I recalled the time I had been thrown by Bess when she stepped into a burrow. We had been trotting through badger bushes when Bess dropped to the ground and I was tossed into the air. I should have known better. I was sick with worry the pony had broken a leg. I waited for her to get up. It had been a great relief when Bess walked toward me. *She's fine, thank God!* It had been a close call with neither of us sustaining any injuries. After that event, I disliked badgers.

I stared at the badger as it nosed along the ground, oblivious that I was standing there. I did not carry a rifle, so I decided to stone the badger dead. Well trained teams did not move or run away so I left the team to rest and gathered a number of rocks. I held one rock in my hand and just when I was ready to throw it, the badger stood up on hind legs with claws stretched out toward me. It made a loud noise and I thought it might chase me. I slowly put down the rocks and went back to the team and said, “Get up.” I was glad to leave. The badger proved to be the courageous one. Although it had scared me, I had to admire the animal. Its feisty nature was a sure sign it wanted to live. It had been right to save the badger's life. I never rode through “badger bushes” again.

David decided that Jimmy and I should plant Morag's crop.

“You have to. There’s no one else,” he said.

David was right. With Dad gone and my half-brothers still youngsters, Morag would never be able to seed the fields without help. It was the right thing to do, yet I wondered how we would manage it on top of working David’s fields as well. We were still working with horses and Dad’s farm was a half section, three hundred and twenty acres. Morag could not afford hired men and the horses back at Dad’s were old and skinny. I wished we had a tractor. David had let me drive his car in the yard and I was learning more about mechanics. A farmer has to fix his own equipment. A tractor seemed like a good idea to me.

Manage we did, and Morag laid out an abundance of food for us, including pies. The tops were on the dark side, but she had made an effort to feed us as in threshing times. Still I kept my distance from her.

If David knew about my past and the beatings, he never heard about it from me. I was too embarrassed to tell anyone and afraid that word would get back to her. While I put in Morag’s crop, David reassured me and checked on me frequently. “Don’t worry about her. I’m here, Ross.”

During a noon hour break, I decided to walk through Dad’s row of cottonwood trees to visit the spot where our horse Belle, spent her final days. Past the trees, I spotted the pile of metal stands that used to enclose the butter churns. The wooden barrels had disappeared long ago. Our cows had never produced enough milk to spare for us to churn into butter. And now that I knew more about farming from my experiences at Willie’s and from helping David, I wondered if Dad had owned a sizable herd of milking cows in the past. Or maybe he had purchased the churns, hopeful for prosperous days to come.

I tried to pull one of the steel metal casements from the overgrown weeds to examine it more closely but it did not give way. It seemed to be tethered to the land. For a fleeting moment, I saw in

my mind, Dad's dream of a flourishing farm. I imagined how he must have struggled to try and achieve his goal. When I pulled harder, the metal stand came apart in rusted pieces and the dream was lost.

After helping Morag put in her crop, I hitched up Mark and Magic to the wagon and drove over to see Willie. I had gathered up enough courage to ask about my entitlement.

Willie had promised me a pig as payment for my work during the year I lived with him and Jane. By now I was dreaming about owning my own farm and a pig would give me a start. There was money in pigs, and David had agreed I could raise it and have more. A pig could produce up to twelve piglets. The future had taken shape in my head and I was excited. Once I sold a few pigs, I planned on getting a milking cow, and later a horse. I had all kinds of dreams; a sturdy house and a Texas gate at the yard entrance to keep my livestock from roaming out into the road. I often thought David should have one for that troublesome cow. All that was needed was my pig.

I went to find Willie.

"What brings youse over here?" Willie asked.

"I came for my pig. Remember?" I said.

Willie stared at me. "I can't give youse one after all," he replied. Willie's blunt tone was final.

I was hurt. It had been Willie's idea in the first place. The piglet would have been a nice gesture. I surmised that he wasn't pleased that I had joined Jimmy at Meade's farm instead of going to work for his relatives. Maybe he thought I had been unappreciative for being given a place to stay when I ran away from home. Or he thought I had been disloyal. Whatever the reason, I was filled with disappointment. Willie had lots of pigs. He wouldn't miss one piglet. I had worked hard. I was worth three cows, never mind one little pig.

After that, Willie and his sons ignored me. My relationship

with the Starlings became strained. Willie barely spoke to me. He seemed bitter about me leaving. That was when I learned some people can hold grudges.

Twice a day I walked David's milk cows and sure enough, my "runner" had decided to take off down the road. It had happened too many times. She had bested me again. She would not stay with the herd. This time I was so angry with her I jumped into David's car, turned the key in the ignition and caught up to her. I was ready to teach her a lesson. *You stupid stupid cow!*

I drove behind her and she kept walking down the road. She was obstinate alright. I shifted down into first gear and crept up behind her and bumped into her rump. *Take that you stupid old cow!*

She dropped to the ground. I had hit her too hard.

I scrambled out of the car to see a bone had popped out of her skin. She tried to get back up on her feet and dropped again. I was horrified and sick to my stomach at what I had done. I left to find David. *Maybe we can save the cow.*

As I drove to the house, I thought Cora could call the vet to heal the cow. I would find a way to pay for the medicine. I needed to undo the damage that I had done.

I found David and told him what happened. Together we went back to find the cow. I still hoped the cow could be saved.

The cow was on her side and lifted her head. Large cow eyes bored into me, staring as if to say, "Look what you did to me." My gut turned into knots at what I had done.

"It's no use. You'll have to shoot her," David said.

"I can't. I just can't do that. I'm sorry, David." Petrified, I ran to hide in the barn.

It wasn't long when I heard the lone shot from David's gun. At least she was now out of her misery. I thought I would feel better after that but I only felt worse. They needed that cow, and my anger had caused this destruction. Where did all that anger and frustration

come from? Without knowing, I had allowed disappointments to build inside of me for weeks. That cow did not deserve to die and I had been the cause of her death. It had been an unnecessary and senseless act to hit her with the car. *I am a worthless nothing.*

Later, I found David.

“I am so sorry about what I did to your cow. Take the cost out of my wages,” I said. My mouth was dry. I didn’t receive wages, but it was all I could think of at the time.

He nodded his head without answering me.

I suppose he knew I was sick with guilt and that I had not meant to injure his cow. *After all they had done for me, including giving me a roof over my head, how could I do that?*

I seemed to be full of pent up emotions yet David and his family continued to be kind to me. They were positive and agreeable when I was negative and sullen. Even when Willie passed away that year, I learned that I could hold a grudge as I chose to work in the fields while everyone in the community attended his funeral. David and Cora did not pressure me. They seemed to know.

I could not have been easy to live with during these times.

It was a long while before I could raise my head up and look David in the eye. He never spoke about the incident with the cow. David and his family were a good influence on me and ever so slowly, all these experiences, were helping to shape me for the better.

*“Whatever you are be that!
Whatever you say be true!
Straightforwardly act be honest in fact,
Be nobody else but you!”*



The Chinaman's Café

Saturday was always bath night and we set up the galvanized tub in the upstairs storage room. Rather than using the hard drinking water from the hand pump in the kitchen, we pumped soft water from the cistern and heated this up on the stove. Heavy water pails had to be carried up the stairs one at a time. When the tub was filled, Cora was first to bathe, then the girls, Enid and Ella. David's boy, Davey, was next, then me, (the water was lukewarm by now) then Jimmy. David had his bath last, so I guess Jimmy and me did fit in like family.

On Saturday nights, David drove us to town in his car to watch the movie. Afterwards, he liked to go to the café. I recall the first time David and Cora took me inside. David passed out some coins to Jimmy, the girls, Davey and me.

"Go get yourselves a chocolate bar," David said as we passed a display case where a large cash register with gold-colored keys sat on top. A slender man wearing a long white apron appeared behind the counter. He had small almond shaped eyes. His eyebrows disappeared up inside his white cap when he looked at me. I may have been staring too hard but I had never seen an oriental man before.

I felt my face get hot and embarrassment prevented me from asking for a chocolate bar. I was still stuttering and could not utter the words, especially under pressure. I looked at the array of chocolate bars sitting in their cardboard containers underneath the glass countertop.

The Chinaman placed his hands behind his back and bowed his head. David shifted his feet as he waited for me to make a

selection. “Go ahead Ross, make a choice.” David nudged me. I leaned over the counter and tapped my finger in the direction of a chocolate bar. The Chinaman bent down and scooped up the bar and held it.

Our eyes met. His eyebrows had come back down from under the cap. He looked at me for confirmation. I nodded my head.

“And tea for my family please. And me!” David laughed as he passed some more coins over. It did feel like “family” and after crowding into our booth, I ate my chocolate bar with slow bites, savoring the sweet taste. David and Cora discussed the movie. As I listened, I could not keep my eyes off the Chinaman as he bustled around the restaurant, returning with cups and teapots.

He nodded to us and backed away to dash over to serve other customers.

“Hot water, hot water?”

David pushed his teapot to the edge of the table and the Chinaman poured from the steel pot he held in a towel. Then he vanished to serve other tables. His staccato speech, “Hot water? Hot water?” reverberated off the walls. He wore a black ribbon at the bottom of his long braid. He darted back into the kitchen and returned with a fresh white towel and a tray of clean dishes. He wiped each dish meticulously before stacking it away on a shelf. The Chinaman never stopped. He moved constantly and looked anxiously after his customers.

I learned that the Chinaman and his family had moved to Canada a decade earlier. They lived in the back of the café and sent their hard-earned monies home to China. The Chinaman had made a new life for his family, yet it was rare to see him at local community events.

Besides going to the movies, David liked to use his car to take the girls and Davey out to activities. Jimmy and I were often included. We went to dances, the curling rink, and winter carnivals. David also drove his family to church and although

Cora gave us the choice, Jimmy and I chose not to attend. We had never attended church back home, but if Mother had still been alive I am sure we would have. Neither did I go to church while living with the Starlings, as they did not attend. Besides church, they missed out on many local community events due to the poor condition of their road. Light rains caused their road to turn into mud, making it impossible to travel.

The road from David's to town had a better base and nothing stopped him from taking his car out, including snowy weather. We always brought snow shovels with us, and Jimmy and I would open a way for the car tires to roll through the fresh snow. We made a game of it, jumping out of the car and seeing who could dig out a path first through snowdrifts for the wheels.

I had a number of enjoyable trips in David's car and it was great fun while passing wagons on the road, to follow David's example and yell out the window, "Why's your horse so slow?" There were laughs all around. People accepted the good natured teasing.

That winter Jimmy and I were separated again when he left to work as a hired man for Cora's brother. It was an opportunity for Jimmy to work on a larger farm, learn how to use a tractor along with other equipment and receive a real wage. I would miss Jimmy but by now I fitted in well with the Meades and their farm seemed like home. I was comfortable with David and Cora and helping them did not seem like work, even when I fixed harness.

Winter is a good time to fix things on the farm that one cannot get to during the busier seasons. With David's approval, I set myself up in the back kitchen and repaired harnesses. Harness leather deteriorates from the heat of the sun and cold of winter. Horses broke old harness frequently and new ones were pricy. I fixed every broken piece I could find, including the "tugs" used for pulling implements. I kept a tally and by spring, I had fixed thirty-six sets of harnesses.

David surprised me by buying a brand new set of harness for

my team. I guess it was his way of showing his appreciation. When I hitched Mark and Magic with their smart-looking new leathers and shining buckles, I was never so proud. And the work horses did not break any of my repaired harnesses that season.

“I don’t think she’ll ever learn,” David lamented. “Morag bought a car from the mechanic in town today. I drove it home for her and took her out in the field to try to teach her.” I perked up to hear what he had to say as Morag could not manage a team of horses, no less a car.

Morag wanted to be able to drive to town in a car instead of by team, and David had agreed to teach her. I had wondered where David had disappeared this afternoon.

We were eating our supper and I feared that David might choke on his meal, he was laughing so hard. “She has a lead foot! She just can’t drive!”

He had a great time telling us about the driving lessons.

David was high strung and enjoyed life. He had a short fuse but his temper always turned around for the better just as quick. He was agreeable, well liked and was always willing to help his neighbour.

David continued. “She has no patience whatsoever. She drives in circles. How’s she ever gonna keep her car in a straight line when she’s on the road? She may have to follow the ditch to town!”

David dropped his fork and knife. He jumped up and ran around the kitchen table to demonstrate Morag steering the car erratically. He grimaced and opened his eyes wide, making a good imitation of Morag, with two hands on an imaginary steering wheel. It was quite comical.

He sat down again to jump up a second time.

“And she stalls it out every time. Here’s Morag driving me. I’m sitting besides her. Watch this!” He threw his head back and forth to show how he was thrown backwards into the seat. We all laughed.

“If she’s not going in circles she’s headed for the trees. I told her to hit the brakes but she hit the gas instead! I’m sorry I agreed to teach her.”

It was a good story. In the end, David bought the car from Morag and gave her a ride when she needed to go to town. David never had any money, but he must have found a way to purchase the rundown car. We enjoyed frequent trips to the Chinaman’s Café in that car.

Since Dad’s death, David had always kept in touch with Morag and her children. It was through him that I was able to keep up with news from home. David was quite open with me and did not hold back much. But if he knew what had gone on while I lived at home, he did not mention it.

*“May all your days be spent in bliss
May all your plans succeed
Be but as happy as I wish
And you’ll be the blest indeed.”*



Adrift



Archives of Manitoba
Agriculture — Livestock, Cattle — c. 1920 (23)

“Ross Reid.”

Holding my cap in my hand, I looked up from my chair and tried to see where the man’s voice was coming from.

“Ross Reid.” My name was called again, this time with a tone of annoyance. A clerk wearing a shirt and tie came from the back of the employment agency and waved to me to follow him. The clerk flipped through a stack of papers. I took the chair in front of his desk and waited.

I had been living with David and Cora and their family, for the past two years. As Jimmy was still working for Cora’s brother, it was decided that I should take the train to the city, some fifty miles away and look for work. David and Cora would manage over the winter and I would return home in the spring.

It sounded like a good plan. I do not remember how I paid for that trip. I had twenty dollars for spending money and I was careful with it, knowing how tough it must have been for the Meades to have put it together, so it had to last. *Maybe I won’t have to use it all and I can take the rest back to Cora in the spring.* Arriving in the city the night before, I stayed in a cheap hotel, which was within walking distance of the train station.

I had eggs and coffee in a café that morning and asked the waitress where to find the employment office. Too shy to ask anyone for a ride, I walked to save the money. On the way, I passed an older man selling newspapers. He had an apron around his waist and customers were standing in line. *I can’t do that – I can’t make change!* Then I saw a young man, dressed in coveralls and cap, with a handkerchief tied around his neck, carrying a steel lunch kit. I imagined he worked in a factory on an assembly line. *I bet he has a good paying job. Maybe I could work at something like him.*

Once I found the employment agency, I gave my name to the secretary and told her I was looking for work. She said to take a seat and wait. I sat close to the door and looked out the window until the clerk called my name.

“Alright. Let’s begin. How old are you?” the clerk asked.

“I’m eighteen.” I wasn’t sure. I had never seen my birth certificate. “I’m looking for work in the city.” I really wanted an inside job.

What is your education and work experience?”

“I have grade six.” I did not think it was a lie although I wasn’t entirely sure if I had passed or not. “And I worked on farms.”

The clerk sorted through the stack of papers again.

“Here’s something, in the next town. Carl Maxwell is looking for a hired man to take care of his livestock this winter. It pays fifty dollars a month, plus room and board. Earnings to be paid out in April.”

I was silent and he must have read the look on my face.

“That’s all I have. It can’t get any better than that.”

I wanted a job in the city, but I had no choice and accepted the position. The clerk made a telephone call and it wasn’t long before I was on my way to the Maxwell Farm.

Carl’s father, Ed, picked me up and I was surprised he drove me by car instead of a farm truck. Ed was neatly dressed and I guessed he had retired from the farm to move to the city. He said Carl planned on moving his family to live with him over the winter. I learned that Carl had left the Air Force to return to the farm, and that he and his wife were expecting another baby. That’s why they needed to be in the city that winter.

All the way to the farm, Ed talked about how he was looking forward to the bonspiel. Curling was a big deal in country towns.

Once we arrived, Ed introduced me to Carl who took me around the barns and the farm. The house was divided into two parts and he gave me a bedroom in the second half. I did not see the other half of the house.

I was never introduced to his wife or child. Carl delivered my meals to me and I ate in my bedroom until he and his family

left for the city.

Carl was a cattle and grain farmer. Maxwell Farm was modernized. There was electricity in the barn, and a heater coil for the outside water trough, unheard of back home. The barn had two doors, entrance and exit and large enough to house his tractor.

Carl showed me what to do, and for the first couple of days we worked the chores together, including milking a Jersey cow, feeding the herd and tending three horses. The barn cats came around for a bit of milk which I fed by pointing the squirting teat into the cat's open mouth.

One day we took the truck and went to the city to run some errands. Carl stepped into the beer parlor while I waited for him in the truck. When we returned to the house, his wife gave him heck. I guess he was what they call, "hen pecked."

After two weeks, Carl and his family left for the city.

Cora had said to write her once I was settled, to let her know where I was staying. I took out the pencil, envelopes and writing paper, she had given me. I formed my words with care as I had seen Dad do when writing letters to my grandparents in England. I'm sure I made a few spelling mistakes but letter writing was important and would keep me connected with David and Cora back home.

Dear Cora,

I was hired to work as a farm hand on Carl Maxwell's Farm, 10 miles west of the city. Carl and his wife have gone to live with his father (in the city) for winter. They have a baby. They come back in spring. I look after 3 horses, 1 pony, 1 milking cow and 11 cows. I wanted you to know.

Ross Reid

Carl had said there was a store in the village, a mile away, where I could post letters. As I rode up to the store, a few people said a friendly hello and I guess they knew the horse. It was nice

to be noticed.

I entered the store with my letter.

"You're Ross Reid, right? Helping out on the Maxwell Farm?" the storeowner asked.

"Yes," I replied. "That's me." I wondered how he knew, but it made sense that Carl would have told the locals about me.

"Could you mail this letter for me," I asked. I passed over two cents to cover the cost of a stamp.

"Yes," he replied. "I'm Mike. Carl said you're spending the winter on his farm."

Mike was a likeable fellow and we exchanged a few more pleasantries. It had been a good plan to send the letter and go to town to meet a few people.

Every two or three days, Carl and Ed drove out to check on the furnace and to pick up the milk I stored in the fridge. I milked their Jersey cow twice a day. She was easy to milk and filled a pail in no time. Carl brought me groceries and I lived on oatmeal and canned stew. If the weather was poor, Carl and Ed did not come around and as I wasn't told to do anything with the oil furnace, I did not touch it. Thankfully it never broke down.

For the first month, I had the company of their spaniel dog. Cocoa liked to sleep on my bed and stretch out across my feet. She was chocolate brown with floppy ears that felt like velvet. I was missing Jimmy and the Meades and I figured the dog made up for my loneliness. I was sorry when Carl took Cocoa with him to the city and I felt like an orphan again.

To pass the time I sang cowboy tunes. I loved Western songs. I sang while mucking out the barn, milking the cow and as I rode bareback on Carl's horse to the store. The horse's ears went sideways. Maybe I did not carry a tune very well, but I had a good memory and remembered every word of the songs I sang.

I was on my way to the village to buy a chocolate bar. I had made fast friends with Mike who introduced me to some of the

other townsfolk. He was a decent fellow and always took time for a chat. I was drawn to the store like a magnet.

“Ross! I wondered if you might turn up today. There’s a letter for you,” Mike said.

I recognized Cora’s handwriting. *Cora wrote me back!*

A warm feeling washed over me. I thanked Mike and rushed back home to read Cora’s letter.

Dear Ross,

We were sure glad to hear back from you and that you found work. I was through the village some time ago. The Maxwells are good people. Thank you for sending me your mailing address. David and Davey are keeping busy tending the herd. Enid helps me in the kitchen and Ella is working on her exams. We are managing but missing you. I will write again. Everyone here says hello to you.

Yours truly,

Cora Meade

I knew Ella was trying to qualify as a teacher and I made a mental note to wish her well in my next letter.

When I wasn’t feeding Carl’s livestock, I cleaned manure out of the barn with a stone boat or replaced fresh straw for bedding. Every day I worked at my chores and I hauled hay from Carl’s haystacks, located two miles away. I had to cut the hay with a two-handled knife, load it and unload it into the barn. This chore took up to three hours a day, but I did not mind as I had to keep busy.

By nightfall, I was ready for my bed.

The weather was turning colder and with the first snowfall, I decided it was time to send another letter while I still could. I thought to write about missing the dog then changed my mind.

Dear Cora,

How is everyone? I am fine. Tell Ella good luck on her

exams. She is sure to pass.

You were right. I met a few people in the village. Nice folks.

Wishing everyone is doing well.

Yours,

Ross Reid

I had wanted to write, “Wishing everyone good health” but I wasn’t sure how to spell health. Besides, I was of few words anyway and decided it was best to keep my letter short.

Carl had told me that once it started snowing to tie a log behind the bobsled and drag it and pack the two mile trail to the haystacks. “Do it every time it snows,” he said. I followed his advice and his method kept a trail open and free of ruts, which made it easier for the horses to travel. By spring, the horses had a harder time to stay on my trail as the snow had become soft and it made walking difficult. I figured out how to get around that problem by taking them before the morning sun, when the trail was still frozen. While I harnessed them up, they nudged me with their noses and threw their heads up into the air. Those horses were well trained and knew their way to the haystacks. On the way home, they always moved faster and I enjoyed a run.

Every week, I traveled to the village across the fields by bareback. I alternated the pony and horses, so they each could have exercise. Just as important, I needed some human contact, at least on pleasant days.

Christmas Eve found me standing near the store counter, looking at the chocolate bars on the shelves behind. Mike came over to serve me.

“Ross, something came for you. A parcel,” he said.

He bent down under the counter and placed a box covered in brown grocery paper held together with brown string. *To Ross Reid care of Maxwell Farm* was written in Cora’s handwriting.

I was so excited. It reminded me of the time when Annie,

Jimmy and I had gone to town to find out the school was closed. We had gone for the mail and picked up a parcel from England. I had that same feeling now. *A parcel for Christmas!*

"It seems like someone remembered you this Christmas, Ross!" Mike said as he handed me my parcel.

"Thank you Mike, and Merry Christmas to you and your family too!"

Mike said, "One more thing, my wife baked you some cookies for Christmas."

I accepted the brown paper bag. I was touched and nodded my thanks.

Instead of a letter, Cora had sent a Christmas card with a picture of Santa Claus in his sleigh, and reindeer with their hoofs up in the air. A sizable red sack overflowed the back of the sleigh. I opened the card.

Dear Ross,

Merry Christmas! Enjoy the goodies. We all miss you and are thinking of you this Christmas week.

God bless.

The Meades

Cora had sent a generous slice of her fruitcake, wrapped in a piece of cheesecloth, shortbread cookies and hard-boiled candy. I had a sudden image of David, Cora, Davey and the girls sitting around the kitchen table and a lump rose in my throat. I missed being with them. Cora did her Christmas baking right after harvest so her fruitcake could soak in its juices and she aged her shortbread in a cookie tin. From the date on the parcel, Cora must have prepared it ahead to have it reach me before Christmas. Cora was thoughtful.

I took a knife out of the kitchen drawer and cut a sliver of the cake and chewed on this, enjoying the blend of dates, raisins and nuts. I swallowed hard, thinking what the Meades were doing

about now.

Dear Cora,

*I enjoyed your Christmas parcel. Thank you for sending it.
Hope everyone had a good Christmas.*

*I am keeping busy with my chores, morning, noon and night.
I keep the barn clean and look after all the animals.*

That's all for now.

Will write again.

Ross

I delivered my letter and waited a week before returning to the store to find another letter waiting for me.

Dear Ross,

Happy New Year! Wishing you the very best! Winter is half way over and it's all downhill from here. We are expecting you back in April. It's going to be a different year when Ella and Henry get married this summer and take over his dad's farm. Stephen and Thora will move into town. Lots of changes!

Henry says to tell you he is looking forward to your help this summer.

Yours truly,

Cora

I knew Ella was going to marry my cousin Henry eventually. I had wondered how it might affect my position, and Cora's letter helped me to know I still had a place to call home. It was the first time being away from people. I was lonely but Cora and I became real pen pals and as soon as I had mailed a letter, she sent one back.

That winter was long, and letter writing with Cora helped me get through it. I did not listen to the radio or read books. The phone was disconnected — not that I would have used it anyway — and I stayed in my bedroom, off the kitchen. I was scared to go into Carl's

living room, but one day I was brave enough to look from the doorway. The time was slow and I did not have any visitors. I kept myself busy with chores and singing silly cowboy songs to the animals. Then there were the times in the village I met up with Mike.

In the spring, when the Maxwells returned, Carl handed me a cheque for two hundred dollars. It was the first pay cheque I had ever received.

“Thank you, Carl!”

I folded up the cheque and placed it in my pocket for safekeeping. I felt rich.

Carl stood by the barn door with his hands in his pocket. “Well you earned it, fair and square. Will you stay on and work through the summer?”

I must have done a decent job over the past four months.

“Sorry Carl, and thanks for thinking of me but I need to get back home and help put in the crop.”

I was humbled that he wanted me to stay but I knew David and Cora expected me back and they needed me more than Carl. Farm work would be easier on Maxwell Farm as Carl had a tractor where David still used horses. It was tempting to stay on as Carl’s hired man. I would have status as a proper hired man, see real pay and probably get the chance to run the tractor, but I had developed a kinship with the Meades and I felt an obligation to return to them.

Chocolate bars and cowboy songs were not the only things that helped me through that winter on Maxwell Farm. I had Cora’s letters to confirm I had a home and people who cared about me. Ever since that winter, Cora made a point of mailing me a Christmas card and after her death, Ella carried on the tradition.

I did return to Meades, but I did not look forward to another summer using horses to plow the fields and battling hot weather. Jimmy was still working for Cora’s brother who owned a Fordson tractor. I figured that the tractor would be helpful at David’s but it needed gas so I took a horse and my earnings from Carl and

travelled to town. I bought a wagon with rubber tires, instead of traditional steel wheels, and three barrels of gas. I returned to Meades and showed David my purchases. Arrangements were soon made to borrow the Fordson tractor. My plan had come together.

When you put gas in a tractor it will work for a long time, longer than horses. The Fordson took the place of four horses as it could pull discs and plows and work all day. I had bought the gas to save the horses from the heat. It was easier on the operator too. I think David was quite pleased. That year, his farm had a head start and the nags were in well deserved semi-retirement. Cora was right; this year was going to turn out to be a good one. Plus I had managed to save a few dollars for chocolate bars at the Chinaman's Café and admission to the movies on Saturday nights.

*“A little thing is a little thing,
But faithfulness in a little thing,
Is a very great thing.”*



Contracts

“Gosh darn it all, Ross, David Meade is taking advantage of you. It’s not right. You should be getting paid wages for all the work you do and thinking about your own future. How are you ever gonna get ahead? Look, I’m gonna write something up for you. Give that to him. That’ll take care of it,” said a neighbouring farmer who owned land next to David’s. The man, who was standing on the other side of the fence had gestured for me to come over. I had climbed down from my wagon. He took out a packet of paper and a pen from his shirt pocket and wrote the contract up. I guess he thought he was being helpful.

This was my third year, living with Meades. When David had asked me to work on his farm, I had never thought about asking for wages. Besides, I felt more like part of his family than a hired man.

David didn’t have any money but I was gullible and although I felt awkward about asking, I passed the contract to David who read it. David must have known where the contract had originated from, yet he signed it anyway. He was good-natured and a gentleman. Then I signed it and placed it in my billfold. I did not feel right about it and soon the whole matter faded away.

Then the day came when I lost my billfold riding horseback. In those days, you carried a billfold with you because it was yours and you felt proud to have it. I had some money in it and the contract. For a long time I kept an eye out for my billfold but never did find it.

I was sorry about losing that billfold and my few dollars in

it, but not for that lost contract. One thing is sure: David had kept his promise of giving me a place to stay when he asked me to help him on his farm. And instead of giving me a roof over my head, he gave me a home. But now that Davey was starting to take on more responsibilities, it was time for me to move on.

“We must eat a peck of dirt before we die.”



Living With Ella and Henry

Just as Cora had predicted in one of her letters, Ella and Henry did marry that summer. Stephen and Thora moved to town, and Ella and Henry took over the Kendal Farm.

After the wedding reception, when it was time for Ella and Henry to leave, I sat in the back of the car, behind the newlyweds, to travel to my new home. Henry and I were in the fields the very next day; there is no time off on the farm.

Ella had fixed up Annie's old bedroom for me.

"Ross, do you mind? Does it make you feel funny?" Ella looked anxiously at me. "I thought you would like to be in your sister's old room."

The space was welcoming, and Ella's touches were everywhere. The pitcher filled with dried flowers, a stack of books on the nightstand. I touched the handmade quilt on the bed and ran my fingers along the headboard. The ceiling slanted on one side and I bent down to look through the window at the fields of oats swaying in the wind.

The window blind that had been closed shut all those years ago, lifted. The feeling of closeness that had been missing, returned.

"Not at all. This is fine." My face must have shown how pleased I was.

I worked for Ella and Henry for the next couple of years and

every month, Henry deposited fifty dollars, the going rate for a hired man, into a bank account for me. I may have been paid as one, but instead of feeling like a hired man, I felt more like I had come home.

Ella and Henry were big on going out dancing on Saturday nights and I often went with them. Orchestras toured across the country and dances were held in neighbouring community halls. The women lined up on one side and the men on the other. Men were expected to do the asking and it was considered not good to be turned down by a lady for a dance.

I stood on the men's side of the room and sized up the ladies. There was a way of telling who amongst the ladies might be good to ask and who might give me a favourable answer. I worked up some courage.

The lights went out, signaling the start of the next dance and I heard the opening strains of the "Tennessee Waltz." I tore off for the other side of the room, toward a nice looking lady. At that precise moment, all the ceiling lights were turned on, exposing me. I was the only person in the middle of the dance floor. When I dashed for the men's side, my feet went into an uncontrolled skid. I had not counted on the cornstarch that had been sprinkled on the floor to make dancing easier and I ended up on my backside. As all eyes stared at me, I quickly found my feet and left the hall and waited out the rest of the night in Henry's car.

After that, I chose the movies on Saturday nights and it was a long time before I found my dancing shoes again. Ella and Henry never teased me about it.

"Joe, what do you mean you don't know your birth date?" Ella asked. I never liked Morag calling me Joe but when Ella and Henry called me by my nickname, I did not mind. They did so with affection.

She looked puzzled. She was busy with a table knife, making swirls into the icing on Henry's birthday cake.

“I just don’t know,” I said.

Her eyebrows rose. “Where were you born?”

“I don’t know that either.” I was embarrassed not to know. It seemed I should have known. Morag never celebrated birthdays back home.

Ella put her knife down and looked over at me. “You know you will always have a home here. But you will never make enough money working as a hired man to buy your own place. You should have a chance at a real job that you can work at, maybe one in the city. And one that won’t hurt your back. Without identification you’ll never be able to apply for work.”

We both knew that my back was giving me trouble and that farm work was wearing on me. I loved the farm but I was not able to keep up my end in return for what Henry paid me. Any thoughts of being a successful farmer with my own farm had faded away. And taking over Dad’s farm was out of the question. That was disappointing, what with increased rainfalls and advances in technology. The era of the Depression had come to an end. Farmers were starting to see better yields, yet it was not for me to realize my dream. Ella was right, I needed a proper job.

“We’ll get your birth certificate and find out.” She looked determined. Ella was the local schoolteacher and knew how to go about these things.

A month later, she brought home a large brown envelope. “Go ahead, open it!”

I held it and stared at the government insignia.

I took out the birth certificate and we read it together. Ella calculated my real age. “You’re nineteen.” I had been born in the city hospital and not on the farm, like most of Morag’s children. I had given the wrong age at the employment agency when I went to work on Maxwell Farm. That did not seem to matter now.

“Ross is your second name. Robert is your first name, like

your father's," Ella said.

I followed her finger to see I had been named after my father. I never knew. *Robert Ross Reid.*

"Thank you, Ella." It was all I could manage to say. My mother must have suggested it and now I had a new connection to my father and I liked it.

*"Remember me and bear in mind
A faithful friend is hard to find
And when you find one good and true
Change not the old one for the new."*



Army Days



*Source: Korea War Photo
Christmas Card, Korea, 1953, 1st Regiment, Royal Canadian Horse Artillery,
Department of National Defense,
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Services Canada, 2012*

JOIN THE ARMY AND SEE THE WORLD!

The Second World War had been over for five years yet the billboard was like a beacon and I stood rooted to the sidewalk, pondering if I should go inside. All I had was a grade six education and back problems. I figured no one was going to hire me so why not join the Army.

A couple of weeks earlier, I pulled something in my back

while playing “high skies” (throwing baseballs straight up into the sky) and Ella had phoned the doctor. She and I had known something was wrong with my back long before then.

The doctor had called the specialist and an appointment was made for me right away.

I had taken the train to the city and Ella insisted on a taxi to the medical clinic. The specialist was on the eighth floor and it was the first time I had ever ridden inside an elevator. I cannot say it was enjoyable.

While I waited for my appointment, I had a look out the window. It was quite a sight for a naïve prairie boy. Pigeons flew back and forth between the tall buildings and electric trains shuttled on the streets below.

The specialist measured my legs and checked me over. The examination only took a few minutes.

“I know what you have. A protruding disc,” he said. I hoped he would fix it. “That’s all Ross. You can go now.”

Ella had said to look for work, so when I read the army recruitment billboard, it occurred to me they could fix my back. I found the recruiting office and asked for an interview.

It was like being back in the employment office except the clerks were in military uniform. I was directed to a waiting room.

A clerk in army dress called on me. He reviewed my birth certificate and completed some paperwork.

He asked, “What’s your experience?”

“Farming,” I said.

He measured my height, weight (I managed to squeak by the requirements) and asked some more questions.

After the interview I was put through a medical. The doctor exclaimed, “What’s wrong with your hip! I want my colleague to see this.”

The second doctor bluntly asked, “What happened to you?” He stared into my face. I looked at the neat creases in his white coat and wondered if he had ironed it himself. *What should I say? Where*

do I start? I shrugged my shoulders and tried to look surprised. Years of stuttering and silent screaming during childhood beatings had made me quiet. *Do I say stinging slaps turn into beatings and a small boy's body cannot take too many poundings?*

After an awkward pause, he looked away and wrote “trauma” on the medical report.

After the medical, I was given a psychological test. This included a sheet of paper with a bunch of stuff on it, including pictures. One picture showed a chair with three legs. I did not know what kind of answer they were looking for so I left it blank and turned in the test, uncompleted. The examiner reviewed it and I thought I saw him raise his eyebrows when he looked at my test, but nothing was said.

More paperwork was completed. A soldier turned up to drive me in a Jeep to the base and I found myself living in barracks.

The next day I called Ella collect and told her I had joined the army. I think she was surprised but it was the best thing for me at the time.

“Stay in touch. We worry about you,” she said. It was comforting to know I had family in Ella and Henry.

Being in the army was not hard work, but it was not always comfortable like when I froze my ears on “parade.” We were issued “Diefenbaker” hats, poor protection against the coolness of early mornings and my exposed ears froze frequently. I grew to dislike parade. Other than that, being in the army was not all that difficult.

Before seeing the specialist, I had withdrawn two hundred dollars from the bank account Henry had set up for me and kept the money in my billfold, stashed under my pillow. It never occurred to me to open up a bank account near the base until the evening my billfold went missing. I reported it to the military police who surmised that another soldier had taken it.

They found him at a downtown hotel, drunk. By the time

they picked him up, all my money was gone. The police were sympathetic when they reported back to me.

“Don’t be so trusting and leave your wallet unattended. You learned a good lesson.”

I did learn my lesson. A soldier’s pay was a dollar a day and I never recouped my loss.

No one asked about me and, as I had not received my “call up,” I stayed in barracks and was given the job to show the new recruits around. Every couple of weeks, recruits moved in and later transferred out to duty. Then another group of recruits would turn up. When I wasn’t showing new recruits around, I stayed busy doing chores and cleanup.

I was a loner. I declined invitations to join the recruits on Saturday nights to find a beer parlor. My nerves were still bad and every time the men returned, I jumped out of bed and ran to the door. I am not sure why I did that or what I was afraid of. The new recruits were friendly enough. It just happened.

Another couple of weeks went by, with a new group of recruits and I showed them around barracks.

It never occurred to me that something wasn’t quite right until the day the Sergeant Major asked for my papers.

“Private Reid, do you have any papers?” he asked.

“Yes.” I passed over the paperwork I had been carrying on me since my first day in the army. I had tried to read it but couldn’t understand what it represented and had kept the important document in my pocket.

He read it through and returned the paper back to me. “The stupidity in some people’s children. You were supposed to go for your kit!” He waved the paper and told me to join the queue at the quarter stores. It was only then that I understood. I was supposed to produce the paperwork in the first few days of joining up to receive my gear.

Surprisingly it did not bother me that the sergeant major thought I was stupid. *He's right, I am stupid.*

Now that I knew, I made my way through the line up and received a gear and barrack box. I stood in another line to join a unit and was deployed to travel in the back of a truck with other recruits to an army base out in the middle of the prairies. The traveling time was long and when we arrived, I was tired and my nerves were frayed more when we were given the news by a sergeant, "Boys, you're going to Korea." *Korea!*

I asked to enlist in the Tank Corp but they needed me elsewhere and I was assigned to "A" Company with the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery. Horses had been replaced with trucks, but I liked the fact that the brigade had historical connections with my favorite animals. We were twelve hundred men and along with "B" and "C" Companies, we had a mission: To support the infantry with the big guns and protect South Korea.

Other than knowing Korea was on the other side of the world, I really did not know much about the country but everyone had heard of the Battle of Kap'yong. The Princess Patricias, despite being surrounded and outnumbered had fought fiercely through the night to save Seoul from the Chinese and North Korean communists. The Princess Pats had not retreated and it was a proud time to be a Canadian Troop.

NATO and democratic South Korea needed back up, and that's how I found myself on a troopship headed for Korea.

Up to now, I had never seen a body of water bigger than the farm dugout, so the Pacific Ocean was an unbelievable sight. It took twenty-one days to cross the ocean and reach our destination in Yokohama, Japan. Not all of us made it. We lost one man. I do not know what the serviceman died of. It may have been a sudden heart attack. Thousands of us stood on deck to witness his burial at sea.

Most of the trip was cold enough to wear your "great" coat and although I travelled with six thousand servicemen it was

lonesome. Along with a few others, I spent most of my time on the top deck, hanging over the side. I did not find my sea legs until we arrived at the Japanese Sea where it was as smooth as glass.

Once in Yokohama, we loaded up supplies and sailed to Pusan, South Korea. From there we travelled in the back of army trucks to the front lines.

My first night in Korea was spent under the stars with my boots as a pillow. During the early morning, it started to rain, and my sleeping bag was like a candlewick and became soaked. By morning, we were motivated to organize ourselves to fill sandbags and build above ground bunkers for protection.

Each bunker was designed to house four men. As we had not been detailed with any materials, we had to scrounge up bits of canvas, poles and boards to make our bunkers secure. Korea's weather is bitterly cold and we fashioned stoves out of ammunition boxes. A hole was cut out of the box top and a copper line, strung outside the bunker from inside a kerosene can, was fed into the box. It worked quite well. If we needed more heat, a makeshift clamp was adjusted to control the rate of kerosene dripping down the copper wire.

I asked to train as a driver and started with Jeeps, before graduating to three-quarter ton trucks. I think I wanted to be a truck driver so that I would not have to sit in the back, in the dark and under a tarp. It gave me a claustrophobic feeling and I liked to see where I was going. Truck driving allowed me to feel in control and I proved to have a natural ability. Maybe all that experience on the tandem disc paid off.

Korea was a thrilling and scary time but no matter what was happening, a soldier, as with the farmer, has a predictable routine of daily chores. We were up early to eat our rations, to shave and wash. Even if the enemy was standing behind us, as soldiers, we were sure to have a shave. That's the army.

Death was only a moment away for any of us. I had a grim reminder of this when I picked up a dying soldier. He had been shot in the stomach by accident in the gun pit. It was a serious

wound and when the officer and medic placed the soldier into the back of my truck, I heard the medic shout, “Pressure, keep pressure, he’s coughing coffee grounds!” The soldier was vomiting blood. I waited while they did what they could but sadly they lost him. It was a somber moment and a silent ride back to base camp. I never knew the dead young soldier’s name or if he was buried in Korea. I wish we could have saved him as he probably had family, maybe even a wife and baby.

Boom! Boom! Explosions from Chinese guns shook the ground. I was with my squad, bazooka on my shoulder, ready and waiting for the command and watching for the enemy. Up to now, I had been assigned to haul ammunition boxes from the Service Corps to the front lines where the shelling bombardment was heavy.

“Light the area up!” the officer yelled. Our sentries, posted in the hills had radioed in that they had spotted North Koreans.

In answer to the command, a multitude of our shells were fired. Projectiles attached with parachutes illuminated the night sky. It was important to track the enemy. If they broke through the front lines there was the worry that they might tie into the radio and infiltrate us. We were suspicious that the Chinese were planning large scale offensives. By night, it was important to keep the area lit and by day we were on endless patrols through hills and valleys, always on the lookout for booby traps and landmines.

When it was over, I returned to Canada. Ticker tape and streamers welcomed us back in the bigger cities but as we travelled further west, the fanfare at train station stops became fewer and fewer. When the train pulled into my hometown, Henry and Ella met me and I spent my two months leave helping on their farm. I was quiet about my war experiences and thankful to have returned home. I kept the stories of the dead to myself.

Fifty years later, found me sharing Thanksgiving Dinner with South Korean missionaries in my half-sister’s home. It was

an honour for this old soldier to break bread with descendants from South Korea. We talked about the politics of war and what transpired back then. I was given gifts and felt humbled when the missionaries thanked me for helping free South Korea.

I brought with me a propaganda leaflet I had found on the ground in Korea. The drawing shows a Soviet Union general pushing on the back of a Chinese general, who is pushing on the back of a North Korean general, pushing a North Korean soldier. The North Korean is holding a gun in one hand and has his other hand held up to protect himself against a wall of smoke and fire. One of the missionaries translated it for me. I had never known what the writing under the cartoon said, so I finally had the full message: “The North Korean soldier is forced to fight Soviet Russia’s War.”

Now it made sense to me as China and Russia supplied arms to the North Koreans. I suspect the Americans had the leaflets designed and dropped for the North Koreans to pick up. The leaflets gave the message loud and clear that their government was not making any decisions; these were being made through China and Russia.

To this day, the South Korean Government expects all their citizens, when they become of age, both men and women, to serve two years in the Army. In fact, it’s mandatory. I had something in common with the peace loving missionaries; we had all been soldiers once.

*“When I am in some distant land
And these few lines you see
Remember they are from a friend
Who often thinks of thee.”*



The Rest of My Story

The army did operate on my back and I found myself on medical leave for the next year. Henry and Ella welcomed me home and insisted I stay with them while I recovered. I helped Ella with her ironing, gardening and worked in the kitchen.

When the year was coming to a close, I contemplated what I should do next with my life. I told Ella, "I'll find work in the city."

I left for the city and found a room. I worked for a moving company and learned how to drive the company truck. I soon found myself at ease driving all through the big city, but my back started to hurt when I moved furniture so I had to give up the job. I applied to a delivery trucking outfit that offered a private health insurance plan and I worked as a helper to a driver on a grocery run.

The work was easy enough. We picked up groceries from city distributors and delivered goods to country stores. The company paid for our lunches and we turned in "chits" to get reimbursed. The driver always ordered the best item on the menu stating he had to be careful because of his stomach problems. He said he had been a drinker and had to eat well. I stuck to the "specials."

For the first few months, I enjoyed the work but I did not see any future in it. I never had an opportunity to drive the truck and, as I did not want to be a grocery boy for the rest of my life, I found myself back at the Army recruiting office. I hoped Ella was not too disappointed.

When Morag sold the farm, Dad's estate was finally settled. Ella sent me word that the lawyer's office had sent me some correspondence. I told her to open it and learned there was a

cheque for a thousand dollars. Together with the money I had earned from Henry and savings from my army wages, I had enough to buy a car, a white '55 Chevy. Originally I had wanted a Ford Galaxy but that was three hundred dollars more than what I had in my pocket, so I ended up buying the Chevy.

I was proud to have saved enough money to buy a brand new car. *My first car!* I was feeling good about myself until I was pulled over by a city policeman.

"Don't you understand lights?" I must have looked puzzled. "You can't go through amber lights! Because if you do, you'll get your new car smashed!" He had a broad grin on his face. It must have been my military crew cut or that I sat short in the seat and gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles. He could see I did not know what I was doing. "Go on, get out of here!" He smiled. I gave him a nod of appreciation. That encounter smartened me up.

Naturally, the first trip was to see Henry and Ella. Half a mile from home, I stopped to wash off the city grime and country road dust with water from a ditch. I was that proud of having something I could call my own. To think I might have lost that car en route when I picked up a hitchhiker on the highway. I had felt sorry for him and was glad when he stopped off at a town. I was afraid he might take over the car.

"Ross, is that your car?" Ella exclaimed when she walked up to find me still in the car, honking the horn.

I had brought the car home for Ella to use, as the army was sending me to Germany. She was family to me and it made sense to return a favour. She was very surprised. I told Ella to get behind the wheel and she drove me to visit my cousins and we showed off the car.

A day or two later, when it was time for me to return to base, she drove me to the train. She was a good driver. She had skill and had set her mind on learning well, but I suspect it also had something to do with driving lessons from her father, David.

I shipped out and joined the contingent of UN Forces in Germany. My truck driving had paid off and I soon found myself on a deuce-and-a-half ton truck towing a 105 mm Howitzer gun.

In Korea, I had watched the crews from afar, but in Germany, on training maneuvers, I was closer to the action. After delivering and dropping off the big gun, a crew set up the split rails to keep the gun stable when it bounced back. Someone cranked the gun into position using the plot numbers from the tech-able and another soldier set up the panoramic telescope. The projectile was handled with care and inserted inside the channel. The tech-ables radioed the data to the guns. The release mechanism was pulled, the gun fired, and a cartridge was dislodged. By the time I had parked the gun to the first firing, the detail took under three minutes. Like everything in the army, we completed our assigned tasks with precision and efficiency.

Being overseas, broadened my horizons and opened opportunities for me. While on leaves, I visited Dad's relatives in England and toured Europe. I bought myself a camera and filled two photo albums during my eighteen months overseas. I met my Dad's parents and his brothers in England, and stayed at the house where he grew up. I enjoyed conversing with my relatives over toad-in-the-hole. I noted my uncles had similar nuances in speech as my dad, and one held his face in the palm of his hand at the kitchen table exactly as my dad had.

I visited Belsen, Germany, a former Nazi prisoner-of-war and concentration camp where thousands and thousands of innocent people had died of malnutrition, atrocities, and disease. The British liberated the camp in April 1945 when the world saw for the first time, the Nazi horrors of the holocaust. Monuments engraved with epitaphs such as *Hier Ruhen 5000 Tote 22.4.1945* (Here Lies Buried 5,000 bodies) were erected over mass graves, forever marking man's inhumanity against man. It had sent a chill

through me to stand on the same soil, where a decade earlier, these poor souls were in a living hell. It made minuscule my experiences of being beaten daily and overworked, and I was humbled to know what these innocent people had endured.

After Germany, when I returned to Canada, I thought more about farming and that I would have a better chance now that my back had healed and that automation was in full swing. When I came home, I learned that Henry had a hired man already. I didn't say a word and chose to rejoin the Army. It was all that I was capable of doing.

I returned to the army base in the city, and found myself living in barracks. I asked to be assigned to the garage to service the big trucks. My first day back in the army found me on the very same "deuce-and-a-half" gun truck that I had driven in Germany.

Every weekend leave found me at Henry and Ella's farm. I helped out with farm chores and spent Saturday nights enjoying a beer with former school chums in nearby towns. I missed farming and returned to Henry and Ella every chance I had, yet I could not bring myself to visit Dad's homestead.

"Come to my party Saturday night."

Connor O'Donnell was trying to convince me to attend his engagement party.

We had both stayed in the army following our return from Germany. We had served together in Korea and had become fast friends while enlisted in the UN Brigade. Connor was a tech-able, designing plots for the gunners. I drove a three-quarter-ton truck and looked after the battery generators for his machinery. We had been a good team in Germany and upon our return to Canada, now worked together on the trucks at the army base.

Connor was Irish and spoke with a heavy brogue. We were never drinking buddies but I did go with him once to an American bar in Paris, France. As the night wore on, it had become clear who

was the drinker and who was the teetotaler. When a U.S. serviceman said, "Reid, you're clean cut!" Connor had laughed his head off. He was fun to be with and had an easy way about him.

"Why did you leave the farm and join the army?" Connor had asked me one day.

"I pulled my back out. I couldn't hold my end up any longer," I replied. It was true but not the whole truth. I did not tell him about running away from home. That was buried inside of me.

Connor was always trying to match me with a girlfriend. "Saturday night. You should come. I want you to meet my cousin, Louise."

Most times, I avoided his invitations by making excuses but this time, I agreed. Connor's fiancée was easy to talk to and after all, it was their engagement party, a special time for my friend. There wouldn't be too many people to meet as it was to be held at Connor's friend's house.

Saturday night came and I left the army base dressed in my best pants and jacket. I drove my '55 Chevy and followed the directions Connor gave me to the house party.

I was the last person to arrive. Connor's friend welcomed me inside his house. The party had been going for a few hours; there was a lot of laughter and cigarette smoke. I grew nervous.

"I like your house," I said.

"A little powder and a little paint make the old girl what she ain't!" my host replied with a grin. I smelled beer on his breath, but he was friendly enough. I had heard the saying back home and it sounded comforting.

"Ross! You made it!" Connor, pleased to see me, introduced me to the other guests sitting in a circle in the living room, before motioning me to an empty chair next to Louise. She had flaming red hair, matching lipstick and long legs encased in dark coloured stockings. She smiled at me.

I was a little reluctant to be sitting so close to Louise, and sat

with my back straight and held the drink Connor had pushed into my hand. The ice cubes melted and after excusing myself, I looked for the kitchen. I figured I could drain it down the sink without anyone noticing.

I saw two of the guests, a young lady and a man who looked a little older than me, sitting at opposite ends of the kitchen table. He was trying to pour a drink from a bottle of rye into her glass, but she had her hand over it. She covered her mouth with her other hand. She sat demurely, and a yellow-colored sweater, was draped over her shoulders. The kitchen tiles behind her, bordered the outline of her auburn hair that curled around her face. I could tell she was shy. She was very pretty.

He refilled his glass with a shaking hand. He was obviously inebriated.

I met up with Connor in the hallway.

“Did you ask Louise out?”

“No.”

“Get going and ask her.” Connor held his half empty glass and the ice in his drink tinkled when he elbowed me.

“I kinda like the other one.”

“Who?”

“The girl in the kitchen.”

“Vivian?”

I had a name.

“Well get going and introduce yourself.” Connor raised his glass and gave me a wink.

I did not know how to court anyone, yet I did not need any further encouragement. I had no education and I worried that people would find out I did not know things. I knew they already thought of me as boring because I had never learned anything. But there was something about Vivian that made me act. My feet propelled me into the kitchen.

Vivian was standing in front of the telephone on the

kitchen wall.

“Hi, I’m Ross Reid, Connor’s friend. I wanted to introduce myself.”

“I’m Vivian Johnson,” she whispered.

She put one finger up to her lip and pointed to the young man passed out at the kitchen table.

“Can I drive you home?” I asked.

Her hands fluttered to her purse. “Please,” she answered with a tone of gratitude.

I fumbled to locate my keys in my jacket pocket.

We were married the very next year.

*“There is only one happiness in life,
to love and be loved.”*

George Sand



Forgiveness

Vivian and I enter the driveway of Dad's old homestead. I almost miss the turn as I do not recognize the place without the buildings. I heard a fire had engulfed the shanty house and barns years ago. The driveway is overgrown with weeds, and the tall grasses try to climb into the car when I open the door. Vivian offers to come with me, but I need to walk the farm alone. It is enough that she is here, and will wait for me.

It must be seventy years since I last stood here. It is September and rolling dark clouds block the sun. I see the bluff of trees where I hid the night I ran away and can still hear Dad's voice, *Ross! Ross!*

I head for the top of the ravine. The rocky land has a hold over me still as I stumble over hidden rocks under long grasses. A reminder of years past, backbreaking work, moving and piling rocks into the ravine. These stones, which the land has regurgitated, are like some of my memories; too large and protruding to step over.

I push on through tall grasses and wolf willows to reach the edge of the dugout where I had contemplated ending it all. The water in the dugout is clear and redwing black birds flit through the bulrushes.

A light mist of rain begins and the droplets drum on the brim of my hat, reawakening old feelings of worthlessness and despair. I turn away.

The threshing machine stands nearby where the shanty house once sat. It looks as if it has gone through a war itself, with its missing parts, rust stain streaks, but as I walk closer, it seems refreshed from the mist. I have a good look at it and open the tool box where Dad used to keep his plug tobacco but all I find are pieces of metal, harness rings and mouse droppings. The wood in

the steel wheels is charred.

I find the sunken area where the house stood and trip over Dad's rods, and the wire for his radio. Trees have grown in where the chimney once sat and I help myself to one of the broken bricks.

The mist has turned to rain. Soaked, I limp back to the car. It does not seem to matter how many clothes I put on, I can never stay warm. I shiver and feel as battered as the threshing machine. The arthritis in my hip and angina pains are tell-tale signs that I have walked too much. I need to reserve myself for our time in the cemetery.

As I come near the car, I see Vivian's smiling face through the window. She raises a bright red thermos and motions me to come inside the car. I cannot refuse her and open the driver's door. She has made us a picnic of sandwiches and hot coffee. I know she worries I push myself too hard.

"You will never change," she says. I hear the smile in her voice as she chastises me now. I accept a sandwich and steaming cup and we sit together, enjoying the warmth from the heater. The rain washes down the windshield. The wiper blades freeze-frame the beauty of the homestead. I tell her a story from my childhood as we wait for the rain to cease.

We find ourselves in the cemetery, five miles away. Vivian had suggested purchasing a memorial marker as the temporary one for Gregg's grave had been lost years ago. Arrangements were made with the caretaker. His headstone may not be in the exact place but records confirm he is buried here. I am thankful that Morag buried my father next to my mother in the same family plot. I have brought a chamois cloth to clean the headstones. Vivian uses a twig to remove bits of moss and redefines the lettering. We read, "Here Lies Beloved Father."

"God Bless Mother."

"Annie - Sweet Sister" and "Baby Gregg."

While pulling the weeds that grow between the metal fencing that outlines the family plot, I think of a poem, for Annie. It just comes to me. I recite my poem to Vivian. She tells me this family plot must be a garden of love. We decide, when the time comes, we should be buried here also.

Returning home, hours later, Vivian reminds me that we play cards tonight.

“Ross, leave the garden for another day.” She calls it an obsession and I call it work ethic. We both know I will be in the garden, as the sun is shining, yet I will try to keep my time short. I remove the bag of wet weeds, moss and twigs we brought back for the compost heap. I survey my garden and think about the new marker for Gregg. I am satisfied that we arranged it and that Morag’s baby son has a place in our family plot.

To this day, I am afraid of being in water, even though I learned how to swim. I feared repeating the abuse. I have night terrors still.

I have always had trouble asking for help. I can never rest and must work, work, work. I may have traveled the world but I loathe going places and meeting people. I prefer to stay home and work in my garden. While in the army, I turned down promotions because of my lack of education and poor self-confidence. My paltry salary managed to keep my family above the poverty line but I always had to keep a garden to help make ends meet. I recall throwing a rotten tomato against the basement wall when my garden was poor one season. I did think we would not have enough to eat. That’s when Vivian found a part-time job.

When I found forgiveness, I found happiness and life has been good. Childhood memories resurface from time to time and that will never change. I accept this. I must. Vivian tells me I am a survivor victim and I think she might be right. The twelve years under Morag’s domination was a living hell, yet made me

stronger, not bitter. The feelings I still hold are hard to express in words. The hardships that were beaten into me, I bear still. The scars will always be there, but I have forgiven.

It is time for cards. Vivian is holding the back door open for me. My face feels wet, yet the sun is shining. I am not the soldier I thought I was. She looks worried and her expression softens as she takes me into her arms. I cling to her, returning her hug.

Years ago, I received a phone call. "Ross, we would really like you to come." I heard the wistfulness in my half-sister's voice, hundreds of miles away at the other end of the telephone line. I held the receiver tight against my ear. I had not heard from that side of the family for a long, long time. My first thoughts were of sympathy for my half-siblings. How life may have been different if I had been allowed contact with them!

I had never planned on attending Morag's funeral. What would be accomplished by going? Besides, the weather had been unusually bitter. I did not relish a four-hour drive on snow-covered roads and having to stay somewhere overnight. It meant leaving Vivian home alone with our young children.

Yet, I could not refuse. I needed to go and I recall the feeling of foreboding. *Morag*. I thought the memories of secret beatings would go down with her into the grave.

If I attended, it would mean a lot to her children, and after years of sporadic contact, I decide to go.

"When?" I asked.

It turned out that Morag's funeral was on my birthday. She was buried next to her second husband, in another town, far away from the Reid family plot.

In these twilight years I reconnected with my stepmother's surviving children and although I am half blood to them, I feel as close as a full sibling. It was the right thing to attend the funeral and it opened a way to stay in contact. They still tell me how

much they appreciated me attending their mother's funeral. The misgivings I had about facing them all melted away. They had reached out to both Jimmy and me, wanting kinship with their older brothers. To have a sense of belonging is a good feeling.

What their mother did to me all those years ago is not of their doing. If they ask about it, I may tell them, that is, if I can form the words correctly. I do not wish to hurt their feelings and damage the relationships we have now.

Morag was their mother. A mother represents love, nurturing and security. My stepmother was none of these things to me. That is the truth. No one can dispute my recollections of what she did to me nor revise my history.

I would tell them about our wonderful father and his dreams. I would tell them about my dreams of owning a farm. How I would not have chosen the Army, how circumstance made my decisions for me. I choke up thinking about working with horses, raising cattle, and operating a tractor. How I loved the farm!

I have one other disappointment. *Annie!*

How I wish Annie was still living! When I reconnected with one of my half-sisters, she made a pencil drawing for me. The drawing shows Annie, Jimmy and I standing in a grove of trees on the farm. I am the toddler dressed in oversized rompers, and stand in-between, hands joined, with Annie and Jimmy. It recalls happier times. When I look at the drawing, it gives me joy yet I cannot pull from my mind a memory of Annie's face. I do not have a clear photo of her, yet I can see her smile and feel her love. I feel the love from Jimmy and my other half-sisters also. Their caring transfers down the telephone line during long distance calls. Vivian has hung the pencil drawing in a prominent spot in our dining room and this treasured gift bridges the time lost and helps the sibling love between my half-sister and me to blossom.

One day I found myself in the Provincial Archives. It took

the better part of an afternoon to go through two cardboard boxes of musty daily school attendance registers. I looked up the register for Annie's final days. The ink is faded but still legible. I see how the teacher recorded Annie as "Present" with a large capital *P* in the corresponding boxes, but on the day of her death and the following days, the spaces are vacant.

I check for a notation elsewhere on the page, anything to indicate Annie's passing. It is as if Annie had vanished. The teacher was young and there was probably no rule on how to record a pupil's death. As with the pencil drawing and the empty spaces in the school attendance register, Annie's face is lost to me. Throughout the years, I have been comforted to hear Annie's spirited voice in my daughters and now in my granddaughter. Annie has become alive for me once again.

When I am feeling low and worthless, Vivian reminds me what Ella said to her on the day of our marriage. "You're marrying a fine man." I have tried to be the best I can be and Vivian tells me that I have done all I can and that is all that can be expected. I try to remember this, yet the aftermath of childhood terrors still creep up and chip away at my self-confidence.

I do not blame Morag. She did not know times would be hard when she married Dad. The Depression was still in the early years. Was Dad the man she thought he was? Did she feel trapped, loaded down with three young children right away? Did my mother's relatives accept her? If life had been different, would Morag have grown to love me?

The scars run inside me, are as deep as the elusive mineral and oil embedded underneath the old farm. I plan to pass down the mineral and oil rights to my grandchildren, but I will not pass down my grief.

I have broken away from the weight of the heavy harnesses I have carried all my life. Misery and suffering taught me not to

repeat the abuse. Somehow, I found a way out of my unhappiness. Perhaps the kindness from relatives and neighbours and the knowledge that Dad loved me, even though he had his own problems, helped me to survive.

I have come to the last page of my story. I have written this for my grandchildren and now I am finished. There is so much more I could write but I am old and must rest. Instead of running away from my memories I have faced them. It is time to let them go. I place the pages of my writing inside a cardboard box and for now, it will rest dormant in a drawer next to my photo albums and army medals. When my grandchildren are old enough to know the truth, their mother will read it to them. I wrote this story, so that my grandchildren will know that abuse is wrong and can affect a person all their life. I did not write it so my grandchildren will feel sorry for me. I put pen to paper so that they could learn from it and strive to be good to others.

I close the drawer and look up to see the framed picture of the threshing machine with my mother and Annie and Jimmy. I am nestled in Mother's arms. I pick up the picture and have a closer look. I know now what it is that I have been searching for all my life. What I have been looking for has always been with me. All this time, it has been inside of me, since the day I was in my mother's last loving embrace.

And now I am healed.

The End



Annie

Dear sister my surrogate mother
Crocuses from the marsh meadow
Made you sing those carefree days
Long before we saw the shadow

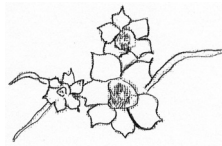
I know my songbird had to leave
When our family came apart
I felt your motherly love and knew
Your song was crushed but not your heart

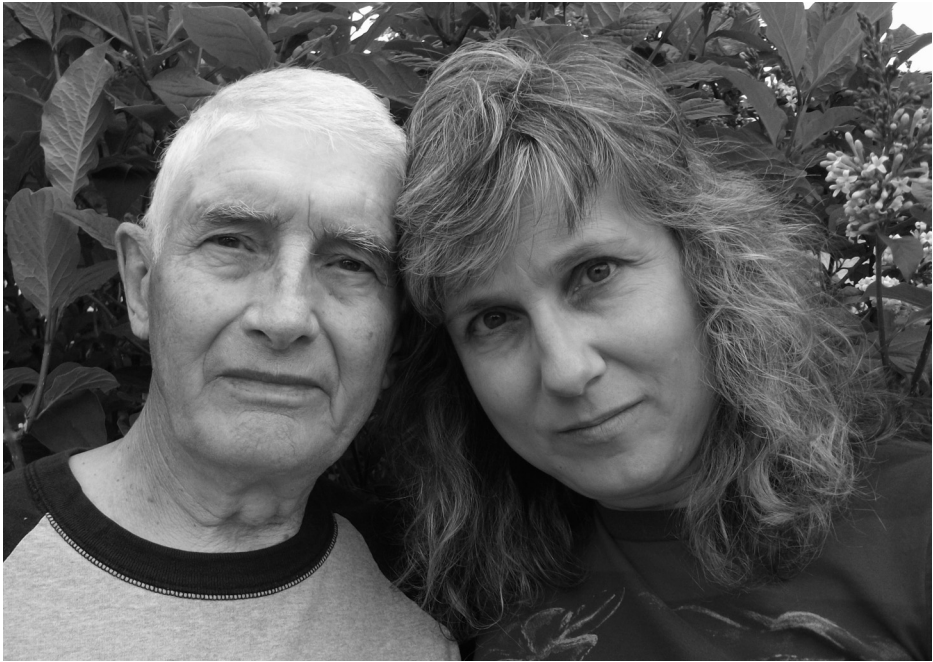
Too young for marriage and still a child
A good mother you would have made
Raising children with smiles and song
And yet again you were betrayed

Your song was taken away once more
A young life ending in sudden death
I regret I was not there
When you drew your last breath

An old man now my heart aches still
Early childhood days filled with wrong
And 'though I may not remember your face
Know I will always hear your song

Ross Reid





The Authors

Broken Harnesses, written by a father-daughter team, is a heartwarming story about survival, hope and forgiveness.

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